

イラスト：黒星紅白

ILLUSTRATION: KOHAKU KUROBOSHI

時雨沢恵一

KEIICHI SIGSAWA

リリアンズ

そして一人は旅行に行つた(上)



電撃文庫

そして二人は旅行に行つた(上)

リリアとトレイズ

I

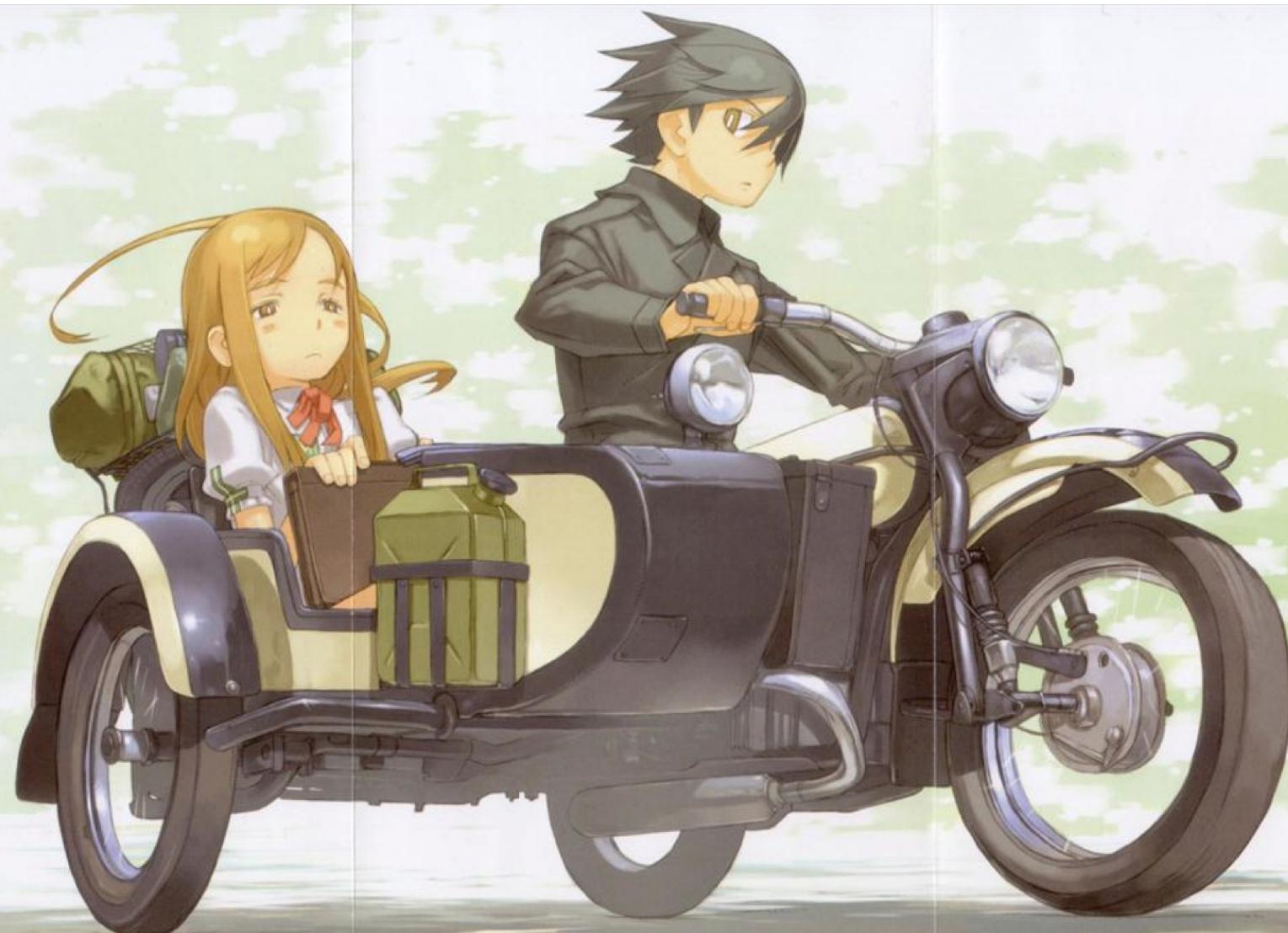


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リリア・シュルツ

十五歳。
ロクシアーヌ連邦(東側)首都に住む上級学校三年生。
母はアリソン、父親は亡きヴィルヘルム・シュルツ。
特技はベゼル語会話と飛行機の操縦。
本名はとても長い。



アリソン・シュルツ

三十五歳。
ロクシェ空軍大尉。
現在はテスト飛行士として活躍中。
首都のアパートで娘リリアと二人暮らし。
寝起きは相変わらずとっても悪い。

トレイズ

十六歳。
フランチエスカ女王とベネディクトの息子。
イクス王国の王子だが、諸事情により王子ではない。
メリエル王女は双子で、どちらが年上かと係争中。
正体を知らないリリアとは幼なじみ。



トラヴァス少佐

三十五歳。
ベゼル・イルトア王国連合(西側)の軍人。
大使館に勤める駐在武官で秘密情報部員。
要するにスパイ。
アリソンの現在の彼氏であり、正体は……。

Lillia Schultz: 15 years old. A third-year secondary school student who lives in the Capital District of the Roxcheanuk Confederation. Her mother is Allison, and her father is the late Wilhelm Schultz. Lillia's specialties are Bezelese and flying aeroplanes. Her full name is extremely long.

Treize: 16 years old. He is the son of Queen Francesca and Sir Benedict. Although Treize is a prince of Iks, certain circumstances prevent him from claiming royal status. He and his sister Meriel constantly argue about which one of them is the older twin. Treize and Lillia are childhood friends, but she does not know his true identity.

Allison Schultz: 35 years old. She is a captain in the Roxcheanuk Confederation Air Force. Allison currently works as a test pilot, and lives with her daughter Lillia in an apartment in the Capital District. She is still a heavy sleeper.

Major Travas: 35 years old. He is part of the Royal Army of the Allied Kingdoms of Bezel-Iltoa. He is a military attaché who works in the embassy, and is part of the intelligence agency—in other words, he is a spy. Major Travas is currently Allison's boyfriend, but in reality—

リリア
トレイズ
I

そして二人は旅行に行つた(上)

C O N T E N T S

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- 89 第二章 「観光と現実」
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Prologue

Crash!

My name is Lillia Schultz. Lillia is my given name, and Schultz is my family name.

Everyone calls me ‘Lillia’, but my full name is ‘Lillianne Aikashia Corazòn Whittington Schultz’. It’s ridiculously long. That’s why I only end up using the whole thing once a year or so. In Roxche—the Roxcheanuk Confederation—not many people have middle names, so everyone who hears my full name asks me what it all means.

I always explain that it comes from an old custom in the West—the Allied Kingdoms of Bezel-Iltoa—where you put the names of both parents and your grandparents into your name. People either get it or look surprised. Some people can hardly believe it.

I was born and raised in the Special Capital District (Capital District for short).

I’ve lived in the same apartment unit and room all my life. Our place is at the very top floor of a cluster of five-story buildings filling the Capital District’s residential district.

Until the Historic Architecture Protection Law was amended and elevators were installed in even the oldest of them, apartment buildings were extremely cheap because climbing the stairs was such a hassle. That was why they were so popular with young people.

“That’s why we rented this place. We’re still crashing here because moving is such a hassle.”

That was what Mom said. She’s still asleep. That crash just now was the sound of Mom chucking the poor, hardworking alarm clock against the wall.

So, as usual, I decide to go wake her myself.

I turn off the electric toaster, put breakfast on our plates, and leave the kitchen. The bricks lining the hall are chipped everywhere, showing signs of age. I go into Mom’s room. I don’t get permission to enter. I can’t get it even if I want to, since she’s still asleep.

The room faces east and the window is installed with thin curtains on purpose. The morning sun is bright. But Mom is lying face-down on her bed, still in her pajamas. She is sleeping with her golden hair covering her face. As usual, her blanket is crumpled on the floor and her pillow is on top of her feet. If she wasn’t sleeping in a double bed, she would have fallen by now. Her right arm, in fact, is already dangling off the side of the mattress.

First I pick up the poor, abused alarm clock from by the door and put it back on the shelf. It is the latest model—with impact-resistant hands and batteries—and expensive to boot. But it’s lasted a surprisingly long time for a clock in Mom’s room. It really is a miracle.

“It’s morning, Mom. Wake up,” I try saying, glancing at the clock on the wall. But hell would freeze over before Mom wakes up that easily. And I’d stay bundled up inside.

As usual, there is no response. I go around the bed and up to Mom’s shoulder. Her left side, today.

Squatting by the bed, I grab Mom’s shoulders as she lies facedown.

“Wake up!” I cry, shaking her hard enough to pull off her shoulders. I show no mercy.

The bed shakes and squeaks irritatingly.

“It’s! Morning! Mom! Wake! Up! Wake! Up! Now!” I yell.

About 19 seconds of shaking later.

“Mmm?”

A reaction. Mom is still alive today. I stop shaking her.

“Mmm...”

With a groan, Mom slowly raises her head. She stares at me—I’m still holding her shoulders—through her messy hair. Her clear blue eyes are still half-covered by her eyelids.

“Who’re you?” she asks. Still not awake.

I come up with an answer. Take this.

“This is the Confederation Police Force. You’re under arrest for using an Air Force aeroplane without permission to teach your daughter to fly, using 200 liters of fuel without permission, and falsifying a ground run of an engine test to justify the use of fuel. What do you have to say to that?”

“C’mom, Officer. It’s all for the noble goal of raising the next generation of pilots,” Mom slurs, still half-asleep, “As long as no one finds out. Right, Officer?”

If I was a cop, I would arrest her on the spot. If a cop’s come to see you, he obviously knows about your rampant personal use of military assets.

“Bye-bye.”

I give up. Mom buries her face in the mattress and begins snoozing away again in the same pose as before. Because she shifted slightly, she’s now lying very close to the edge of the bed.

That’s all. The ignition’s been started, so I get up and wait for the engine in Mom’s head to warm up. And I aimlessly look around her room.

I cleaned the room yesterday, so there is no dust on the floor. I haven’t left a single fallen leaf by the flowerpot. The big dresser catches my eye. Mom’s been talking about moving it to the north-side wall for days, but she still hasn’t done it. On the clothes hanger by the dresser is the boring dark-red uniform of the Confederation Air Force, top and bottom side-by-side. She must have gotten them ready last night. Women could wear either pants or a skirt; today, she is going to wear a skirt.

On the collar of her top is a badge of rank with three stripes—three stripes for the rank of captain. Over the left breast is a square, multicolored embroidered patch. Her name is embroidered over the right breast. Of course, it reads ‘Schultz’.

On the oaken desk is a small electric lamp and an oak bookshelf. There are difficult aeronautic theory books and a thick book of fairy tales from the West that I’ve never seen her read.

And a picture frame.

It is a pretty silver frame. Inside is a color photograph, slightly yellowed with age.

There are two people in the picture. They were shot from the knees-up, but the angle is wonky—it looks like the picture was taken looking down at them.

One of them is wearing a light yellow dress. She looks like a lady from a rich family. She has an awesome and confident smile, and has long blond hair and blue eyes. Mom, when she was younger.

Next to her is a boy with light brown hair, who’s wearing a school jacket and uniform. He must have moved his head when the picture was taken, because his face is a complete blur. It

kind of looks like he's nervous. The backdrop is the platform of a train station. I can see a dark sky, a hazy green forest, and a station sign that's written in Roxchean but only the first part is visible. It looks like a 'Ka', but I have no idea where that is.

The boy is Dad—Wilhelm Schultz—when he was younger.

It's the only picture of the two of them together—in fact, it's the only photo of Dad, period.

"Mmm...? Hmm..."

I turn to the bed where Mom is mumbling.

"Mmm..."

All of a sudden, she gets up. She loses her balance and falls back-first on the floor with a loud noise.

"Huh...? What?"

I can hear her voice from across the mattress.

"It's morning, Mom. You're going to be late," I reply coldly.

Mom raises her head from behind the bed with a pout. She shoots me a glare. "You're awful, Lillia... You know, your father used to wake me up every morning with a kiss. He used to stroke my hair and wait next to me until I woke up."

I guarantee you that that is a lie.

"How do you know that?" Mom asks.

"I didn't say anything, Mom. Anyway, you have to wash up, brush your hair, and eat breakfast. You're going to be late. You said you're going to get a pay cut if you're tardy again, right? I'm not going to the command center for you even if they call. It's embarrassing."

"All right, all right."

Who's the mother around here, anyway? I sigh.

"And you said you're going to have lunch with Mr. Hero today, right?"

"Hm? Did I?"

This is ridiculous. She's the one who pranced home last night and announced it as soon as she stepped through the door.

"Oh, right! That's right. I'd better dress up nicely."

Sleep completely chased from her, Mom leaps over the bed.

"Good morning, Lillia. You're looking as lovely as usual."

Planting a kiss on my cheek, she rushes into the bathroom.

I go back to the kitchen, brew tea for both of us, and start breakfast first. It tastes delicious.

"Sorry to keep you waiting," Mom says as she emerges, although I haven't waited for her. She is in full Air Force regalia. It's hard to believe that she is the same person who was half-asleep in pajamas in her bed until just earlier. Captain Allison Whittington Schultz of the Roxcheanuk Confederation Air Force. A female test pilot who's the undisputed #1 in the Confederation. What a flawless transformation. This is how she fools the taxpayers who support her.

With a 'Thanks for the meal', Mom begins eating. I observe her as I sip my tea.

She has clear blue eyes as beautiful as the sky on a winter morning. And strands of hair that glint like fine strings of gold.

“Hm? Wha iff iff?” Mom asks with a sandwich in her mouth, noticing my gaze.

“Well, I just kind of wished I could have gotten those from you.”

“Those?”

“Your eye and hair colors.”

Mom nods in understanding and gulps down her tea.

“It’s all right, Lillia. You have Wil’s eyes and hair. And that’s the biggest proof that you’re his daughter.”

The same answer as usual. And nothing more. I hold up the teapot.

“More tea?”

“Sure.”

“Make sure to lock up when you leave. Don’t be late for school,” Mom says, skipping out the door.

For someone who has the gall to say to her commander, *“Days without flights are too boring, sir. To be perfectly honest, I want to make up excuses and skip work those days,”* she is pretty cheerful.

She also once said, *“I wonder if there’s going to be an accident on the way to work. Then maybe I could use the traffic jam as an excuse...”* but today, she’s going to rev up the engine on her beloved car, drive through the packed Capital District streets, and race down the autobahn.

That’s all thanks to the date she has scheduled with Mr. Hero.

He’s Mom’s boyfriend. ‘Hero’ isn’t his name, of course. I don’t know where the nickname came from—Mom never told me.

A long time ago, Roxche was involved in a stupid (from my perspective, having been born after the war) conflict with Sou Be-II over who was the ancestor of humanity. Mr. Hero is from Sou Be-II, and he’s working at the embassy in the Capital District. He’s something called a ‘military attaché’—he’s around Mom’s age, but he’s a rank higher than her at major. According to Mom, he’s one of the super-elite. Straight from the cream of the crop.

He came to visit us at home a few times when I was little. I still sort of remember the last time he came over. Mom was sitting in a chair drinking tea, giving him orders as he moved the dresser. She was lording it over him like he was her underling or subordinate.

“Is he a ‘nobody’?” I asked Mom right in front of him. Mom was flabbergasted, but at the same time she sounded impressed.

“Oh my, Lillia. Where did you learn that word?”

Now that I think about it, that was really rude of me. I still remember how Mr. Hero was smiling bitterly. Mom answered,

“Mr. Hero here’s fallen head over heels for me, and he owes me a lot. So I can order him around as much as I’d like, whenever and wherever. Isn’t that useful? I’m going to boss him around forever.”

Now that I think about it, that’s unbelievable. I wonder what Dad would say if he were still alive?

That’s right. Dad’s already gone—he passed away a little while before I was born.

I heard that he got into an accident while he was on his way to the West for some business. Apparently he fell off a luxury train while it was passing through the mountains.

They never found his body.

Another uneventful day of classes is over. It's going to be summer break in just a few more days.

"Bye, Lillia."

"Bye. See you later."

I say goodbye to Meg—who is busy with club activities—take my bag, and head for the gates.

To get home, I have to take a bus from here, transfer to the metro, and then walk a little more.

I chose to attend this secondary school—and I like it a lot. But it's a bit of a chore to commute here every day. It'd be nice if someone could come pick me up, but I'm going to have to refuse Mom showing up in a slick, flashy sports car like last time, or her friends from work driving here on their way to see her sometimes on a green four-wheel-drive vehicle topped with a machine gun.

"Oh well."

That's how things always are.

I decide that I can kill time reading on the bus, and step out the school gates. About a dozen or so female students are crowded in the school parking lot outside.

One of them asks someone, "Where are you from?"

Someone is surrounded by the sixth-year girls. I can't tell who. But I guess it doesn't really matter. I pass by the commotion—

"Ah! There you are."

I hear a familiar voice from the crowd. A male voice.

Over 20 eyes glare daggers at me from the five o'clock direction.

"Lillia!"

Don't call me by my name!

"Miss Lillianne Aikashia Corazòn Whittington Schultz!"

Don't call me by my full name!

I turn with a furious glare. The sixth-years flinch like they've spotted a wild animal from the zoo on the loose, and move aside so I can see the owner of the voice. Tch. Talk about being uselessly considerate.

"It's been a while, Lillia. How're you doing?"

Surrounded by the girls is a motorcycle equipped with a sidecar. It's a pretty new model, and the sidecar is spacious. The owner is sitting on the motorcycle. Put simply, he's a boy one year older than I am. Done.

I give him a look. He suddenly speaks up.

"Huh? Don't tell me you forgot about me. We used to play together all the time—heck, we used to sleep together, too."

The sixth-years shriek in unison. It occurs to me that I should give this guy a good punch or three. I go up to him, ready to do just that, when a senior-classman—who is both ridiculously beautiful and ridiculously rich—speaks up.

"Is this your childhood friend?"

"Yes. Looks like this is goodbye for you and me, ladies. What a shame."

"Flattery will get you nowhere."

“Hmph.”

The senior-classman scrutinizes me like a product on display. Then, she calls her friends away as she heads for the luxury car waiting for her. If you stare, the least you could do is apologize. Talk about rude.

I go up to the guy who is waving like a smiling idiot and scold him.

“What are you *doing* here?! Why?!”

He *is* my childhood friend. I remember playing with him a lot when I was little. But that’s only because he lives next door to the most famous inn in the Kingdom of Iks—the country in the Central Mountain Range on the western tip of Roxche that I visit with Mom every holiday season—and because there aren’t many other kids our age in that valley.

Incidentally, Iks has been the most popular tourist destination as voted by Roxche for the past 10 years. Under the rule of the wise and beautiful Queen Francesca, Iks has been drawing in tourists while maintaining its trademark culture and history. It’s also on very good terms with the royal families of Sou Be-Il. I don’t know her name, but there’s also a princess. The next ruler is also going to be a queen.

Anyway, this guy’s name is Treize.

I don’t know his family name. After he gave me this embarrassing gem—“*Call me Treize of Ikstova*”—it sounded kind of stupid to use a title for him. So I just call him Treize. We’ve hung out once or twice a year over the past few years. I’ve never met him in the Capital District, though.

I can’t even pay lip service to his messy pants and patched-up jacket. He’s wearing a long pair of boots—which I can’t tell if they’re for horseback riding or motorcycling—and he has a belt pack around his waist.

I don’t really dislike this guy or hate him. But he does get on my nerves.

Treize finally answers me.

“Allison sent me.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. When I got to the Capital District, I called the Air Force number she gave me before. She told me, ‘It’s about time for classes to end, so seduce or kidnap my daughter home.’”

I can’t find the words to answer.

“She also said, ‘Lillia’s school’s pretty far from home, so I’m sure she’ll appreciate it.’”

“Really?”

Treize points at the sidecar and tells me to get in. It is covered in dirt. Not exactly the kind of thing you want to escort someone in. There’s luggage and travel gear piled on the back of the seat and the sidecar. Bags, a sleeping bag, a tent, pots, and stuff like that.

“Don’t tell me...did you come all the way here from Iks on your motorcycle?”

“Of course,” Treize answers simply.

I don’t believe this. Does this guy even know how many thousands of kilometers it is from Iks to here?

“I didn’t have enough money to stay at hotels, so I camped out on the plains on the way. I came as fast as I could, but it still took 20 days.”

“Are you an idiot? It only takes three days by train or aeroplane.”

Aeroplanes are the hottest mode of transport for vacationing these days.

“Stuff I don’t fly or drive myself just isn’t that fun. You know what I mean, right?”

“Ugh...”

I don’t give him an answer. I understand what he means.

The reason Treize bugs me is because he shares the two talents I have that other secondary school students don’t. My two specialties.

One is flying.

When I was little, Mom used to leave me at the daycare on the Air Force base. When flights were grounded due to bad weather, Mom would bring me to the hangar and show me the aeroplanes. When I got a little bigger—big enough to sit in an aeroplane seat—she would often take me out for a ride. Mom drove me to a primary school near the base. After class, I would often go to the base to play, and Mom would take me on an aeroplane ride whenever she had the time. And when I was around 10 years old,

“Why don’t you give it a shot, Lillia? No one’s watching, anyway.”

“Okay!”

It was unbelievable, but that’s when I started learning to fly an aeroplane.

Just like a normal mom teaches her daughter how to bake cookies, Mom completely ignored official Air Force pilot training programs and taught me to fly.

Once I started getting the hang of flying to my heart’s content, she taught me takeoff and landing procedures, aerobatic maneuvers, how to read the instrument panel, how to read the weather, and about different types of aeroplanes. Maybe she’s just that good of a teacher, or maybe I have talent, just like she says. Right now, I’m better at flying than I am at riding a bicycle.

Treize also knows how to fly an aeroplane.

Thanks to Queen Francesca’s love of aeroplanes, there are apparently a lot of crafts used for tourism in Iks. Maybe that’s why Treize knows. When I expressed my disbelief, the next day, he brought a small aeroplane from somewhere and flew it right in front of my eyes. To be honest, he was a better pilot than me. He was doing aerobatic maneuvers to the background of the incredible Central Mountain Range.

The other talent we share is our fluency in Bezelese.

I can speak Bezelese, the official language of Sou Be-II. That’s also thanks to Mom. We spoke both languages at home ever since I was little, and until I started going to daycare, I thought that was what all families did.

Unlike before, there’s a lot of activity between Roxche and Sou Be-II, both on the cultural and economic levels. Students in good academic standing are chosen as exchange students and are given full scholarships by the government to study cross-river. People can go by train, ship, or aeroplane, but not many people can speak both languages yet.

My school offers Bezelese classes, but when I asked the Bezelese teacher if I should take the class, I received the credit on the spot and was told that I had nothing more to learn in secondary school. According to the teacher, I should take it in university for writing a thesis or something.

Treize also speaks Bezelese. That’s another mystery, but it’s probably because Iks gets a lot of visitors from the West.

“So are you gonna stay at our place?”

“Allison gave me permission. Although I’m not sure if a certain childhood friend will. Hey, did you just snort?”

Man, he’s got good ears.

“Never mind. Fine. So you’re taking me home, right?”

“Of course, Milady. Please, have a seat. The helmet’s in there, right?”

I pick up the leather hat that rolling in front of the sidecar seat. It looks like an aviator hat. I put it on and pull the tinted goggles over my face so no one will recognize me.

The streets in the Capital District are sometimes incredibly congested, and sometimes completely empty.

Treize follows my directions. He’s pretty good at riding a motorcycle. It’s much better than the metro, which brakes out of nowhere every five minutes.

At this speed, we probably have time for a detour. I tell Treize to take another route because I want to drop by somewhere.

We arrive at a park in the middle of the Capital District. It’s a refreshing place where the entire area is covered in grass and woodland.

“‘Bemarté Park’, huh? Funny name.” Treize remarks, parking the motorcycle by the road. I step onto the grass. The I lay down and look up at the blue sky.

“Ah...that feels good.”

“Aren’t secondary school students supposed to go straight home after class?”

“What are you, my teacher?”

“No, but...”

“Then cut your worrying. And move away a little. Someone might think we’re friends or something.”

“Sure, sure.”

“One ‘sure’ is enough.”

“Sure, Milady.”

“What’s with the Old Roxchean?”

I lay on the grass for a while, looking up at the cool green trees and the sky filling my view. I don’t visit this park often, but ever since Mom brought me here for my birthday, Bemarté Park’s been one of my favorite hangouts.

With my right hand I draw an aeroplane.

“Whoosh.”

It climbs, then twists at the apex and drops straight down. I repeat the motions for fun. Now that I think about it, I haven’t gone flying recently because of school. I should ask Mom once summer break starts.

Wait, summer break? Something’s not right here. I open my mouth with my eyes still on the sky.

“Treize.”

“Yeah?”

“You just took a 20-day trip. What about school?”

“I don’t go to school. Didn’t I tell you?”

I turn. Treize is sitting with his legs stretched, looking back at me.

“Then do you work? Don’t tell me you fly tour planes?”

“Huh? No...” he trails off.

I ask him what he does every day.

“It’s a secret.”

What the heck? Surprisingly, he looks pretty serious. I ask, “Doesn’t your family say anything about it?”

“I can’t tell you.”

“What? But you know everything about *my* family. Tell me,” I say, sounding a little more pushy.

Treize stares at the sky for a while. Is he just going to ignore me? But at that moment, he clenches his right hand into a fist, puts it over his chest, and says in a completely serious tone,

“It’s a secret. The moment I tell will be when I propose to you, Lillia.”

What. The. Heck?!

Who does he think he is, some sort of mysterious prince? I leap off the grass and kick him in the back.

“Driver, we’re going!”

“Sure, sure.”

“One ‘sure’ is enough!”

“Sure, sure...”

When I return home on my servant’s motorcycle, I find Mom’s sports car in her usual parking space. After a car company moved in by the narrow road next to the apartment complex, people wouldn’t stop parking illegally there. So they had no choice but to dedicate one lane to parking and make the other lane a one-way street. People rub bumpers as they squeeze into any space they find.

We park the motorcycle and take the elevator up to the top floor. Of course, I don’t carry a single piece of luggage for Treize.

“I’m home.”

I leave Treize at the door as he struggles with his things, and run into—

“Welcome back. It’s been a long time.”

Not Mom, but Mr. Hero. He just walked out of Mom’s room.

He is a man in a brown uniform, with black hair and glasses. Mr. Hero puts a finger to his lips and slowly shuts the door, leaving it slightly ajar.

“Hello,” I say to him.

Mr. Hero says in a quiet voice, “Hello, Miss Lillianne. Do you remember me?”

I reply half-automatically, “Yes, Major Travas.”

Major Travas of the Sou Be-II Royal Army. He speaks Roxchean as well, but right now he is speaking Bezelese.

“You were on a date with Mom today, right? Thank you for taking the trouble to bring her all the way home.”

“Not a problem. Your mother was complaining about being tired, and she just fell asleep.”

“I see. Thank you.”

“Actually, I’ve been invited to join you for dinner. May I wait here?”

“Be my guest,” I reply, and say no more.

Major Travas thanks me and heads for the living room further down the hall. He’s come here a few times, so he naturally knows the layout.

I stand in front of Mom’s door and peer inside. The setting sun is casting an orange light into the room, and she is lying on the big bed in her comfy military-issue sweats.

She looks happy. How many times have I seen that expression on her face?

I close the door completely.

And just as I turn back to the living room, I remember someone. I turn again and switch gears to Roxcean. It doesn’t really matter what language I spoke, but still.

“You come in too. The spare room’s open, so just put your stuff there or whatever.”

“All right. Who was that?”

“Mom’s boyfriend. From cross-river.”

“Does he come often?”

“Not much these days. Well, doesn’t really matter.”

“Is this really all right?”

“I said it is. It’s fine.”

“Really...?”

Treize looks a little upset. He begins to put down his armful of stuff in the spare room. I walk in the opposite direction from where Major Travas disappeared to. And,

“Here. Let me help.”

“Thanks.”

Treize looks strangely sincere. Almost like a kid. I’ve almost never seen him make that face.

“What? Puppy-dog eyes won’t get you anywhere with me,” I say, trying to hide my surprise.

“You could at least get me a cup of tea or something.”

That’s pretty rude.

Oh well.

I guess I can get some tea for the two guests.

* * *

“I’m gonna go change, so watch TV or something. Also, don’t even think about peeping.” Lillia said as she went into her room. The boy and the man sat at the table with two steaming cups of tea between them.

Lillia opened the glass door and disappeared into the room along the hall.

When Treize turned, his eyes met those of the major. He was looking at him.

“Huh...?” Treize gasped.

“What might be the matter?” Major Travas asked in Roxchean. Treize shook his head, answering that it was nothing. Then, he picked up his cup and happily sipped his tea.

“Hmm...”

Suddenly, he realized that Major Travas had not even touched his cup.

“You think Lillia poisoned it or something?” Treize asked, a little annoyed.

Major Travas shook his head. “Not at all. It’s just that hot foods and drinks give me a bit of trouble. It’s a habit I could never fix.”

“I see,” Treize replied, and returned to his tea. He was about halfway through when,

“It’s been a long time. It’s an honor to be able to meet you again,” said Major Travas.

Treize put down his cup and gave the man a quizzical look.

“Have we met before?”

“Yes. Although it’s been nearly 10 years now. You’ve grown quite a bit, Your Highness.”

Treize silently glared at the man.

Major Travas slowly bowed. Treize glanced at the hall. Thankfully, Lillia was still in her room. “...Please, raise your head. Who are you?”

Major Travas did as he was asked. “The one you suspect me to be.”

“I see...so it’s you. The one Father and Mother always spoke of.”

“Yes, Your Highness.”

“The true Hero of the Mural, the Magician who saved Mother, Allison’s trustworthy subordinate, and—”

“Did they tell you that much?”

“—Lillia’s father, Wilhelm Schultz. I knew I saw a resemblance. She has your eyes.”

“Ah, so that was why—”

“Yes.”

“I’m happy to hear that.”

Wil picked up his cup, blew on it, and finally began to drink.

“This tea is delicious. It’s the first time Lillia’s ever brewed tea for me.”

Treize silently emptied his cup. When he placed it on the table, Major Travas said quietly, “I came here today because I was told that you’d be coming to the Capital District. I wanted to let you know about me.”

“I see. ...I will protect your secret with my life.”

“Thank you. But your life comes before my secret. You must protect yourself, and—”

“And?”

“The person you love.”

“I will.”

Treize and Major Travas continued to quietly chat over tea, making sure to occasionally glance down the hallway.

Major Travas asked about Treize’s family.

Treize explained that his mother Queen Francesca, and his father Benedict—who had left the Sou Be-II military to help his wife—were both doing very well and were in good health. That they were so relaxed that they could often go back and forth between the royal palace in Kunst and the valley. That the only hard worker in the family—his sister the princess—was left to grumble about how it was all up to her to get things done.

“Meriel thinks she’s the older sister, but I think she’s the younger one. We argue about it every time we meet. Being twins sure is a bother. But Mother was right to choose Meriel. I like being free to roam around like this.”

“I see,” Major Travas replied, an amused smile on his face.

Treize asked how Wil had gotten Sou Be-II citizenship.

Although Treize added that Major Travas did not have to answer, Travas told him that, upon graduating from Confederation Capital University after two years of study, he became the adopted son of a trustworthy Sou Be-II aristocrat. That he attended university in Sou Be-II for about two years under the tutelage of a distinguished individual. That, as planned, he took on the job of clearing up international problems at the embassy.

“It was quite painful to kill Wilhelm Schultz, but I did not wish to get the innocent involved,” Major Travas confessed, his eyes narrowed.

“You mean Lillia?” Treize asked for confirmation.

Major Travas nodded. He then explained that he had fewer dangerous missions now, and that thanks to that, he was able to spend more time with Allison as her boyfriend.

“One day...will you be able to tell Lillia the truth?”

“I’m not sure. Would it be best to tell her, or keep her in the dark? What do you think?”

“I’m not sure...” Treize answered, mirroring Major Travas’s answer.

At that moment, Lillia finished changing and came out of her room. Major Travas also noticed that she had come outside.

They ended the conversation they had as their true selves.

“Please take care of Lillia.”

“Of course.”

Placing a hand over his chest, Treize quietly but firmly nodded. Then he added,

“Although I have no idea what *she* wants of me...”

Chapter 1: And so the Two Left on a Trip

The 4th day of the seventh month, the year 3305 of the World Calendar.

The Roxceanuk Confederation was known for its cool summers, owed mostly to the brisk, dry seasonal winds that blew in from the north.

The official name of the confederation's capital on the northeastern part of the continent was the Special Capital District. It was an independent part of the confederation not affiliated with any of its member states. Five-story apartments took up a good chunk of the residential district surrounding the city center and its civic buildings.

And in one room in one particular building,

“WHAT?!”

Lillia Schultz raised her voice.

It was early summer, at around noon.

Lillia Schultz was 15 years old.

She had long, straight brown hair and big, light brown eyes.

When she stood still for a photograph, she looked like a pretty and demure girl. But at the moment, she was wearing a look of indignant fury.

Lillia was a student at a famous secondary school in the Capital District. She was wearing her summer uniform—a white blouse embroidered with the school crest, a red tie, and a green skirt.

Her official name was Lillianne Aikashia Corazòn Whittington Schultz. Lillianne was her full given name, Aikashia was the name from her mother's parents, Corazòn was the name from her father's parents; Whittington was her mother's maiden name, and Schultz was her family name.

She was shouting loudly in the dining room of the apartment, slamming her hands onto the table as she stood.

“Calm down and listen to me, Lillia.”

Across the table sat her unflappable mother.

Lillia's mother was Allison Whittington Schultz. She was in her mid-thirties, but she looked deceptively youthful and attractive. She had sky-blue eyes and long blond hair tied above her neck. She was also in a summer uniform, albeit a red military one. She wore a long skirt and a short-sleeved summer shirt affixed with her badge of rank, along with a dark blue tie. On the name tag over the right breast was the name ‘Schultz’.

Reduced to angry silence, Lillia did as she was told and plopped down on her chair, then placed her fists on the table.

“I'm sorry to say this, Lillia,” Allison said, “but by the time the Air Force gets to the testing stage, they have to prioritize the military's and the developers' schedules over the pilots'. Even if, for example, a pilot's daughter were starting summer break, they wouldn't delay production,” she explained.

Having just returned from the end-of-classes ceremony, Lillia had been surprised and overjoyed to find her mother home, and had suggested that they head to their favorite restaurant

nearby for lunch, where they could make plans for the summer. Until then, Lillia had been enthusiastic. But Allison asked her to take a seat. Lillia had ended up sitting at the table, still in her uniform. And what her mother said was that, in two days' time, she would be out of the house for a while for an aeroplane testing assignment.

“Why does it have to be now?” Lillia said sullenly.

“Why, I wonder?” Allison agreed, glancing out the half-open window. A middle-aged woman was hanging up her laundry in the window of the apartment across the street. Lillia’s hair shook in the wind.

The mother-daughter conversation had come to a stop. Time passed.

“Er, I brewed some tea. Drink up before it gets cold,” said a male voice.

Allison turned with a word of thanks.

“What do you want!?” Lillia glared in a perfect show of venting.

“Here. Have some tea.”

The boy was a year older than Lillia, and had slightly long black hair and brown eyes. He was about a head taller than Lillia, and had soft but attractive features. He was handsome enough that if he were dressed up, girls might come to him instead of the other way around. (But at the moment, he looked a little scared.) He was wearing a light yellow apron over his cotton pants and T-shirt.

“Oh, you’re still here? I thought you’d gone back to Iks, Treize.”

“Nope. *You’re* the one who ordered me to make you tea as soon as you got home, Lillia,” Treize retorted firmly, approaching the table with a teapot in his right hand and a platter laden with three mugs on his left. Expertly placing the mugs on the table, he poured the steaming-hot tea.

“Thank you for everything, Treize,” said Allison. Lillia also thanked him, albeit more brusquely.

“Thanks.”

Treize placed his own mug to Lillia’s left and took a seat.

After a sip of tea, Lillia said, “Anyway, Mom. I’m not going to get mad at the Air Force —I mean, we’re living off your salary. But to be honest, I wanted to play around for the first half of summer break and do my homework during the second half.”

“You always do narrowly finish your homework.”

“Well, yeah. It’s practically tradition at this point, but otherwise I don’t feel like doing schoolwork at all. I’ll just spend the first half relaxing—”

In the middle of the everyday conversation between mother and daughter, Lillia suddenly remembered something.

“Wait! You said you’re going to be doing test flights for 20 days straight!”

“Yeah. Maybe even longer, depending on the weather.”

“Then...does that mean you’re gonna stay there the whole time, Mom?”

Allison nodded.

“It’s not an ordinary base, honey. I can’t tell you the details, but it’s a little far from the Capital District. I can’t commute there every day.”

“Th-then—”



Lillia glared at the boy in the apron drinking tea next to her. She pointed at him.

“Then I have to stay with Treize the whole time? Here, just the two of us?”

“I guess so,” Allison replied nonchalantly. Lillia raised her voice again.

“No way! With *this* sorry excuse for a guy?!”

“Now, now, be nice, Lillia. And what’s wrong with Treize? He’s a good cook and an excellent housekeeper. You have no idea how much I appreciate all his help.”

Lillia nodded, sullenly agreeing. But she quickly shot back.

“But still! You want a teenaged guy and a teenaged girl to live in a house together, just the two of them? As a mother, aren’t you worried? What if we have an accident or something?”

Treize quietly sipped his tea.

“Don’t worry, Treize is a gentleman.”

“How can you be so sure?”

“Because I’m good friends with Treize’s father, who is a gentleman.”

Treize quietly sipped his tea.

Lillia shot him a glance, then replied dubiously, “Still...”

Allison put on a loving smile.

“It’ll be fine as long as you don’t force yourself on Treize.”

“Why *would* I?!”

“For example, when he’s asleep and defenseless.”

“Are you out of your mind, Mom?! I would *not*!”

Treize quietly sipped his tea.

Treize’s homeland was the Kingdom of Iks, now called ‘Ikstova’. It had been five days since he arrived at the Capital District after leaving his home. Allison accepted him as a guest, giving him the spare room that was usually reserved for winter clothes, skis, and unguarded military rifles. Meanwhile, Treize had taken Lillia’s orders (“If you’re freeloading, you’d better do at least this much”) to heart and was acting as her chauffeur. His job was to drop off and pick up Lillia near her school every day on his motorcycle. He also made sure to sightsee around the city between trips.

On the second day of his stay in the Capital District, Treize volunteered to cook for the family.

“You’re not going to burn down our kitchen, right?” Lillia had questioned him.

In response, Treize put together a marvelous breakfast from the ingredients in the fridge as Lillia watched.

“...Not bad.” Lillia was forced to admit. Treize bowed courteously.

“I am honored, Milady.”

Between bites of her cheese-and-veggie omelet, Lillia had asked Treize where he had learned to cook.

“From my parents.”

Allison, who had finished changing, had joined the breakfast table and chimed in, “You haven’t met them yet, Lillia, but Treize’s parents are good at everything.”

“Huh. Then make me more tea, Treize.”

“As you wish.”

Though Lillia did not know, Treize was actually an Ikstovan prince.

However, he was not officially recognized as royalty. Because of an age-old rule in the royal family which allowed the monarch to have only one child, only Treize's twin sister Meriel was declared to the public. Very few people knew of the prince's existence.

Treize's mother was Queen Francesca of Ikstova. His father was the former Royal Air Force pilot Carr Benedict, the hero who discovered a historic mural that ended the war between East and West. If Treize had been an only child, he would by now be surrounded by servants and advisors in the restored kingdom.

But now, he was in the Schultz family home in the Capital District, being told off by Lillia.

"This is ridiculous. Go back to Ikstova, Treize!"

"Hey..."

Allison answered for the lost Treize, "Is that any way to speak to a guest, young lady? I'm sure Treize has things planned out, too. And he came all this way from Ikstova."

"But still! ...Oh, wait! I could just go to the base with you, Mom. Problem solved. Watch the house while we're gone, Treize."

"I'm sorry, Lillia. But this base is off-limits to civilians. There's nothing I can do about it."

"Ugh."

Pouting, Lillia guzzled the rest of her tea and put down her mug on her left side. Without a word, Treize filled it about 70% of the way with practiced hands.

"Then how about I go traveling somewhere on my own?" Lillia suggested, turning her mug in her hands. The tea was about to spill. "Mom goes to work, and I go on a trip. And since we have someone to watch the house, it all works out!"

"That won't do either, Lillia. You're still 15. What if you get caught? They're really cracking down on minors traveling alone these days."

"Tch. Damn the ministry of education."

"On that note, I have a suggestion." Allison said, her eyes twinkling.

"What is it?"

Both Lillia and Treize (who had been silently listening all this time) looked up at the uniformed Allison.

"Lillia, I think it would be wonderful for you to go on a trip. So you should go with Treize."

"What?!" Lillia screeched, making a point of displaying her anger. Allison continued nonchalantly.

"You're not breaking any rules as long as you're with a 16-year-old. That solves everything. And don't worry, I can at least cover your costs."

"B-but! Well, I'm thankful for the money, but! You want me to go on a trip with *him*, alone?!"

"Oh? How is that any different from staying home alone with Treize?"

"Still..."

"Lillia, there was someplace you always wanted to go, right? In Tolcasia. The city of La-something."

“Ah! Lartika in Tolcasia? ...Really?”

“It’s the perfect opportunity for a summer vacation.”

“Yes!”

“But. You have to go with Treize.”

“Ah...ugh...”

Lillia cradled her head in her hands, a truly fierce debate raging in her mind.

“So? What’s your answer?” Allison asked, amused.

Treize watched the conversation and blankly thought about the fact that the Schultz family had been making his summer plans for him without even asking for his opinion.

“Like mother, like daughter,” he said very, very quietly under his breath.

That evening.

There was a small blackboard hanging on the wall of the Schultz family’s kitchen.

Normally, it displayed shopping lists and expiration dates for the food in the fridge. But now, it was filled to the edges with words under the title ‘Summer Vacation Plans’.

Allison: 6th of the seventh month - Will be doing secret test flights for a secret top-of-the-line fighter plane in a secret secret base. Will be going to the secret secret base. Will call Lillia when the secret return date is decided.

Lillia: Early morning, 6th of the seventh month - Will be going on a sightseeing trip to Lartika in Tolcasia with Treize, who is simply a chaperone. Including two days for travel, the trip will last seven days. After coming home, remember to call the gas company to reconnect the gas supply. For living expenses before Mom comes home, withdraw money from the bank. Make sure that the automatic payment for the rent has been made. Make sure to throw out the oversized garbage.

Treize: I promise to be a good chaperone. I don’t know what I’ll do after the trip, but I’ll figure it out then. Although I don’t even know where exactly we’re going, I’ll do everything Lillia tells me to, even if it’s carrying her luggage. ←You don’t need to write that. -Lillia ←Is that any way to speak to a guest, Lillia? -Allison ←You’re being too nice, Mom. Even if he’s a guest, you shouldn’t spoil him! -Lillia ←Thank you so much, Allison. -Treize ←Hey, stay off the board! -Lillia ←But... -Treize ←No ‘but’s! We’re going to the department store tomorrow to buy stuff for the trip, so come along and help me carry stuff. You’re so—there’s no more room here, so I’ll just tell you in person!

* * *

Early morning. The 6th day of the seventh month.

Allison and Lillia stood at the doors of the apartment building, on the narrow road squeezing through the city.

The road was packed on either side with cars that threatened to encroach even on the sidewalk. Even though it was already a one-way road, there was only enough room left for one car to squeeze through at a time.

Treize's motorcycle was parked between the cars. The motorcycle's engine cylinders were jutting out on either side, and on its right was attached a sidecar fixed with a luggage holder. In the sidecar was camping gear Treize had brought all the way from Ikstova, along with Lillia's leather suitcase.

Between the apartment buildings they could see the sky; it was covered in grey clouds, and rain seemed to be on the way.

"You've made sure to bring your money?" Allison asked. Her hair was a tangled mess, and she was wearing a red cardigan over her light green pajamas. She was also wearing a pair of sandals over her bare feet.

"I got it. I put just a bit in my wallet and put the rest in the travel belt," Lillia replied. She was wearing a light pink blouse, a pair of beige culottes, and a light jacket—all clothes that were easy to move around in.

"You have your ID?"

"Packed. I didn't put it in my wallet, just to be safe."

"And you have your emergency contact info?"

"Packed. I wrote it down."

"Medication?"

"Packed. Stuff for headaches, colds, and stomachaches."

"And what about Treize? He came out with us, right?"

Lillia glanced at the motorcycle. Treize was squatting on the ground, undoing the lock.

"Packed. He's right there."

"Did you call, Milady?" Treize asked as he finished, getting to his feet. He was dressed just like the day he arrived at the Capital District—dark olive cargo pants, slightly long boots, a white T-shirt, and an old leather jacket.

"No," Lillia replied.

"I see. Preparations are complete," Treize said, joining the Schultz family.

"Take good care of Lillia." Allison said, meeting Treize's gaze. Treize looked directly into her blue eyes and nodded firmly.

Allison then turned to her daughter.

"Take care, Lillia. And have fun."

"Thanks, Mom. Have fun with your new fighter plane. And also—"

"Yes?"

"Whatever base you're staying at, please try to get up on your own. Otherwise you'll give a really hard time to the poor soul who has to wake you up."

"Ohh... All right, I'll try. Have a good trip, Lillia."

Allison smiled and planted a kiss on Lillia's cheek. Lillia kissed her mother back.

As Treize watched, he suddenly found himself meeting Allison's gaze.

"Would you like one too, Treize?" Allison asked, reaching towards him. Lillia slapped down her hand.

"Don't bother, Mom."

“Hey, that’s not nice,” Treize grumbled.

“Ask your own mom for a kiss,” Lillia snapped back. Then she added in a softer tone, “As I wish, right?”

Treize nodded. Slightly.

“Yeah.”

“Hmm... Lillia, you should be the one giving Treize a kiss after all.”

Lillia reacted instantly.

“Denied!”

“It’s going to be a long trip, you know. Plenty of time for at least one.”

“Denied.”

“There’s no need to be stingy.”

“I said, *denied*.”

“You keep saying so, but I bet you’re thinking to yourself that once might be all right? A mother knows what her children are thinking.”

“Nope.”

“Just do it when no one’s looking.”

“That’s not the problem here.”

“Just a quick one on the forehead.”

“It’s not about *where*.”

“It’s not like it’ll hurt.”

“That’s not the problem, either.”

“Or maybe you’re too shy when you’re sober?”

“Mom, I’m a minor.”

Standing idly by the mother and daughter, Treize waited for their conversation to end.

It was a little before morning rush hour. The Capital District’s streets stretched on under the cloudy sky.

The motorcycle, laden with luggage, was traveling down a six-lane street. Because helmets were not required by law, Treize was only wearing goggles over his eyes. Lillia sat in the sidecar with the windshield raised.

Treize stopped the motorcycle at the traffic light and glanced at Lillia. She was staring straight ahead.

“Y’know, don’t people usually look happier when they’re going on a trip?”

“Hm. I guess that depends on who you’re going with,” Lillia replied, her gaze unwavering.

“But you can’t go traveling without me.”

“Which is why I’m so angry. Life really is unfair.”

“You can say that again.”

The light turned green.

Capital West Station.

It was one of three train stations in the Capital District, and as apparent from its name, it was the station in the western part of the city. And because the continent extended far to the west, this station was the Capital District's largest.

As soon as they made a turn at the thoroughfare, a vast parking lot and a traffic circle appeared before them. Beyond stood a massive glass dome that looked like a sports stadium. The dome encased over 10 platforms, and nearly 20 tracks branched from the building and to the west.

Lillia and Treize would board a sleeper train bound west. They paid extra to take Treize's motorcycle on one of the freight cars as well. Lillia first got off the motorcycle at the station entrance.

“You take care of the luggage.”

“All right. You can take care of our tickets. You have the reservation number written down, right?”

“As if I'd be stupid enough to forget.”

“Sorry.”

Treize took the motorcycle to the side entrance, entering the station through the freight gate. He did as the station employees instructed and rode through the station, which was packed with cargo from the morning trains. Eventually, he reached a large check-in area on one side of the end of the platform.

Soon, Lillia came walking down the platforms with the tickets and a paper bag in hand. She showed the tickets to an employee and pointed at Treize and the motorcycle. The employee gestured Treize over. He rode the motorcycle cautiously across the tracks and to platform 4. As they showed their tickets, the train slowly entered the station, pulled by a steam locomotive.

Lillia and Treize left the motorcycle and their bigger luggage in the freight car and boarded the passenger car. Lillia was carrying just her suitcase and a paper bag. Treize had a small backpack and a belt pack.

They were in a four-passenger cabin in second class. The door and a glass wall covered by shades separated the seats from the corridor. The seats faced one another, and each seat could be converted into a bunk bed. Cabins in first class were for two passengers each and were larger, but they were also more than double the price.

Treize held open the door and Lillia stepped inside. The passengers they were to share the cabin with were not there yet. Treize placed their things on the shelf above the window and secured them with the elastic strap there. They both took off their jackets, hung them by the window, and sat face-to-face. Lillia faced the front of the train, and Treize (with his belt pack turned to the front) faced the back.

Lillia unfolded the table from under the window and took out the contents of the paper bag. Two tetrahedral packs of milk and four loaves of bread with jam.

Once the conductor finished checking the passengers' tickets, the train left the station in the morning as scheduled. The locomotive gave a long whistle next to the platform, which was filling with morning commuters. The other passengers who were to share Lillia and Treize's cabin did not show up, even when they left the station.

The train sped up. When it left the station, Lillia saw the Capital District's familiar grey apartment buildings packed in under the cloudy sky.

“Sitting around like this is so boring,” she grumbled.

“True. But it’s not like we can drive the train ourselves. And it would take two days to get to Lartika by motorcycle,” Treize replied.

“Read the guidebook, Treize. We should at least know the basics about where we’re going,” Lillia said, and started on her breakfast.

Treize quickly finished eating first, and fished out of his backpack the guidebook he had bought the other day.

Their destination was the city of Lartika in the country of Tolcasia.

The Roxcheanuk Confederation was a union of 16 member states and territories on the eastern half of the continent, and Tolcasia was one of them. Its territory began 600 kilometers southwest of the Capital District.

Tolcasia bordered a gigantic lake called the Kurz Sea.

1200 kilometers long and 500 kilometers wide, it was the biggest lake in all of Roxche. The Kurz Sea was a large watery surface in a land of flat plains and woods. And in spite of the name, it was a freshwater lake. The Kurz had been a cornerstone of river traffic in Roxche from time immemorial, and countless canals were connected to the it.

Tolcasia was located on the southern shore of the Kurz Sea, and was known for its particularly lengthy shoreline. The country itself was not very large, being a long strip of land attached to the southern bank.

Until about 2000 years ago, there was no country there—only large fishing towns scattered by the water. The first Kingdom of Tolcasia was only founded 1500 years ago. The country went on to be invaded many times over, entering times of decline and revival in turn.

About 1000 years ago, a king proposed that they build a settlement on the lake. He supposed that an island in the lake would not be easy to invade, and put his absurd idea into motion. He first selected a shallow part of the Kurz Sea, then put down stakes on the lakebed and transported large boulders by ship to create a foundation. And with tens of thousands of rocks and bricks, he created land.

Then, he laid the bricks on top and created a fortress, complete with roads. Over time, the island expanded, and the town was completed centuries later.

That was the origin of Lartika. The land was made of stone, and the buildings of reddish-brown bricks. The canals and horizons were cut into geometric perfection. With a thriving fishing and trading industry, the town became a harbor city and the capital of Tolcasia. At the limit of its expansion, the city was about 25 square kilometers in size and was nearly a perfect square.

When Roxche was first created 200 years ago, the city rose to fame as a wondrous settlement floating on a lake. That was when it became a renowned tourist destination.

With the development of the railroad system, Lartika became an easily-accessible destination for Capital District residents. The city invested even more effort into its tourism industry—hotels were built and restaurants and souvenir shops created, and with the city offering both historic tours and leisure on the lake, Lartika thrived as a tourist destination.

“So it was really famous, huh,” Treize remarked as he finished reading.

The world outside the window had changed from the bustling city to rural fields stretching toward the horizon, though the sky was still cloudy. The train was traveling southwest through the Republic of Farkas, which was just west of the Capital District. According to their schedule, they would reach the large town of Bren near the Tolcasia border early next morning.

To reach Lartika, they had to take a boat from Bren and cross the lake. They would leave Treize's motorcycle in the town.

Treize suddenly found himself glancing at Lillia. She had finished breakfast and was leaning against the window with her gaze fixed on the scenery. Neither particularly happy nor sad, she was the picture of calm—no different from usual.

Silently, Treize continued to stare in a daze.

“What?” Lillia said, looking at him. Treize was taken aback.

“N-nothing. Wanna read the guidebook?”

“No thanks. I know the gist of things anyway. You can put it away.”

Treize did as he was told and put the book back in his bag. Then, he rolled up the paper bag filled with garbage from breakfast, took it outside the cabin and threw it in the trash in the corner of the car, and returned to his seat. Lillia’s eyes were locked on the scenery outside.

Treize also looked out the window from his seat. Lillia’s reflection overlapped with the grey and green background of the world.

Suddenly, droplets of water splattered against the glass. They were followed by a veritable torrent of rain, striking the window in the gust.

Countless drops of water covered the window in an instant, and the scenery became hazy.

Afternoon.

The train continued through the rainstorm.

They stopped at three stations on the way. Treize bought lunch at one of them through the window. It was a paper box containing two servings of sandwiches. Lillia and Treize ate their lunch in the cabin. And just as they finished up, the people they were to share the cabin with finally arrived.

They were a couple in their fifties, dressed in classy clothing. They briefly greeted Lillia and Treize and casually took their seats. The husband alternated between reading the newspaper and taking naps. The wife busied herself with embroidery, her hand expertly outmaneuvering the shaking of the train.

Treize leaned against the window frame, looking out the translucent glass. He glanced at Lillia; she was absorbed in a thick book.

He stared at the ceiling for a while. When he looked down, he met Lillia’s eyes.

“You’ve been reading for a while now. Do you like books?”

“Meh. They’re better than boring conversations.”

“I see. . . . Do you want some tea? I could get some from the dining car.”

“Not now. I’d just end up wanting to go to the bathroom.”

“I see. . . .”

The conversation was over in seconds. Lillia returned to her book.

The middle-aged woman, who had been working away next to Treize, discreetly flashed her finished embroidery to her husband.

‘This is going nowhere’, it was written among the roses and little birds. Slowly but firmly, the husband nodded.

No one spoke for about an hour. The only sounds in the cabin were the noise of the wheels, the plopping of water falling against the window, the shuffling of Lillia’s book, and the clicking of the woman’s deft needlework.

Eventually, Lillia closed her book and put it on the table. Treize looked at her.

“I’m going to the bathroom,” said Lillia, “Should I pick up something on the way? Tea?”

“Yeah, sure. If it’s not too much trouble.”

“Then that’s two cups of tea,” Lillia replied, squeezing past the middle-aged man and leaving the cabin. Her footsteps disappeared towards the bathroom at the end of the car, drowned out by the sound of the train.

“Phew...” Treize sighed loudly. At that moment, the man sitting diagonally across from him suddenly leaned over.

“What are you doing?”

Treize turned, neither surprised nor visibly annoyed. The man spoke as though they were acquainted.

“What are you doing, Your Highness? How could you make Miss Lillianne pick up your tea?”

“Well, she’s the one who offered...” Treize retorted feebly. The woman turned.

“Then it would only have been right for you to act the gentleman and reply, ‘I’ll come with you and carry the tea’!”

Treize was not pleased.

“Right...so I’d appreciate it if you left me alone.”

“How could we, sir, after that shocking display? Where is the *conversation*? A young man and a young woman, alone in a cabin, and all she does is bury her nose in a book! Do you understand what that means, sir? She has no interest in you! I infer that you must have made no progress during your time at the Capital District, either. What would we have done if not for Ms. Schultz?” the woman scolded Treize quietly, showing him no mercy. The man continued where she left off.

“Indeed. You must make conversation! Think of something romantic that a woman might like. Books, the latest films, anything!”

“I just don’t get that book she was reading, and I’ve barely watched any films.”

“Which is precisely why we’ve been telling you all this time that you should get away from your aeroplanes and guns and hunting sometimes,” the woman said, flushing red as she shook her head. The man continued.

“This is your chance, sir. A trip to a beautiful city, just the two of you. There’s no better time or place to develop your relationship.”

“Okay, just leave me alone.”

“Preposterous! You must *act*, sir, or Miss Lillianne’s heart will only grow distant!”

“Forget growing distant—I don’t think her heart’s been that close in the first place...”

“I can’t take much more of this. Honey, we’ll have to put our plan into action immediately,” the woman said.

The man nodded and whispered to Treize, “Your Highness. Once Miss Lillianne returns, the two of us will act like delinquent elders and provoke a quarrel. We will bother you with all we have. That is when you come in and gallantly cry, ‘Stop this immediately!’ That will solve everything. I’m sure Miss Lillianne will be won over by your dauntlessness. What do you think?”

“I’ll also do my best to seem like a delinquent old woman.”

The couple looked excited to put on their little show. But Treize shot them down.

“Stop this immediately.”

“But Your Highness—” “Your Highness—”

“Just leave me alone!”

The moment Treize raised his voice, the door to the cabin opened.

Lillia was outside. She was not carrying anything. Treize froze.

Lillia’s eyes fell on Treize.

“Treize! What are you *doing*!?” she said indignantly, striding into the cabin.

Thwap.

“Ow.”

She smacked him on the head.

“How could you pick a fight with these people?”

“What? But—”

“No ‘but’s!’” Lillia cut him off, and took out her wallet from the jacket she’d left by the window. “I forgot to bring money. I’ll go get the tea, so stay put and be nice.”

“Huh? Oh, right...”

Treize nodded obediently. Glaring at him one last time, Lillia apologized profusely to the couple and went to the door.

“Oh, wait... I’ll come with you. I’ll carry the tea,” Treize quickly said.

“It’s fine. I’m going to get a thermos,” Lillia replied, and left the cabin.

For some time, the only sound in the cabin was that of the train gliding along the tracks.

“Ugh...” Treize sighed.

“Don’t lose heart, Your Highness.”

“You must steel yourself, Your Highness.”

“And just whose fault is this to begin with?”

“Miss Lillianne truly is a strong-willed and motivated young lady.”

“Just like Lady Fiona when she was young.”

“Hey, don’t shirk responsibility like that.”

“I do wonder how ‘Lady Francesca’ is doing right now.”

“I’m a little worried.”

The couple quickly changed the subject. Treize could do nothing but sigh.

Then he mumbled, “She’ll be fine as long as Meriel’s around.”

* * *

At the same time, at the royal palace in the city of Kunst, in the Kingdom of Iks situated in the middle of the continent.

“Treize and Lillia must be on the train by now. I wonder how things are going?”

“Who knows?”

The queen and her husband were conversing in Bezelese, the official language of Sou Be-II.

They were in the queen’s office in the palace—it was not a particularly large room, but the beautiful wood-finish interior lent the office the air of a cozy cabin in the mountains. On one wall were ceramic plates, pictures, and wooden plates carved with intricate art.

Framed photographs hung from the opposite wall. One was a color photo capturing the snowy mountains; the snow was so white it was blinding. There was also a group picture taken in front of what seemed to be a village hall. The people in the photo, all middle-aged or older, were smiling. There was another photo of a city with blue roofs taken from overhead, and a photo of the queen and her husband sitting on either side of a crib where a pair of identical-looking babies lay. In another photo, a woman with blond hair was holding the babies.

In a corner of the room was a kitchenette and a round table. In front of the wall was a heavy desk. Sitting there was Queen Francesca of Ikstova. She was still rather young, not yet 40 years of age.

She had fair skin and short black hair. The queen was wearing a white half-sleeve blouse and a long skirt. Around her neck was a pendant—a small golden coin. In her right hand was a weighty royal seal. And on the desk, ahead of her left hand, was a mountain of paperwork.

Next to the desk, by the round window through which the cloudless sky was visible, was her husband Benedict. He was leaning against the frame. His messy brown hair and beard, which covered his mouth and chin, made him look rather like a mountain man. He was wearing a checkered shirt and cotton pants with many pockets, as though he were prepared to go hiking at a moment’s notice. In spite of his attire, however, he wore an elegant golden pendant around his neck just like Francesca.

“Oh? Is that any way a concerned father should be acting?” Francesca asked, pausing from her work as she looked up. Her Bezelese was fluid, and she had perfect pronunciation.

“To be honest, I don’t care about any other couples as long as the two of us are fine.”

“Oh my.”

Benedict walked up to the smiling Francesca. Leaning over her, he looked into her face.

“So forget the paperwork for now—” He winked and switched to Roxchean, “And will you join me for morning tea? Please let ‘Queen Francesca’ rest for a while, Fi.”

Fiona looked around.

“All right. That sounds wonderful. It’s not like anyone’s watching.”

“Then I will brew the tea—”

“—and I’ll get the jam.”

“Excellent. But first, will you kiss me?” Benedict asked, leaning in. Fiona smiled again and closed her eyes.

They occupied themselves with the kiss for some time. Then—

Thud.

The office door slammed open. But they did not break away.

“You two!”

The girl who barged inside pointed an accusing finger at the couple.

She was a pretty girl in her mid-teens. Her long black hair was tied back in a sloppy ponytail, and she was wearing grey work wear stained with oil. The girl glared at the couple as she reached back and shut the door.

“Oh my. Meriel.”

Finally pulling back, Fiona turned. The newcomer was Princess Meriel—Treize’s sister. The princess strode up to her parents.

“Your Majesty, get back to work. And her husband! Don’t get in her way,” she warned, slamming her hands on the desk. Some of the documents were pushed back several centimeters by the force. “Also, Her Majesty’s husband? *Please* shave that beard. Just looking at it makes me feel stuffy!”

“Ohh.” “But—”

The queen and her husband complained in unison.

“I think the beard is fine, once you get used to it. A lot of men grow out their beards in Iks.” “That’s right. I thought I looked pretty thuggish at first, but you just have to get used to it. I look like a mountaineering tour guide, don’t you think? And I can go incognito easily like this, as long as I wear a pair of sunglasses.”

Fiona replied in Roxchean, and Benedict in Bezelese.

“Argh! You two drive me up the wall!” Meriel cried in Bezelese, shaking her head, “Forget the beard! Just stop interrupting the queen’s work! The prime minister already scolded her about not getting her work done on time!”

“True. Your dedication to duty never ceases to amaze me, Meriel.”

“I think you could try to relax a little.”

Meriel clenched her fists.

“This is hopeless... Ikstova’s future rests on my shoulders.”

Her parents replied simultaneously,

“Do your best, honey!” “We’ll be cheering you on.”

“Please stop acting like this is someone else’s business!” Meriel cried.

* * *

Inside a cabin in a rain-soaked train.

“Princess Meriel certainly is dutiful.”

“Indeed she is. The future of Ikstova is bright.”

Treize mustered up every ounce of sarcasm he was capable of.

“You got that right. Much better than some stupid, indecisive prince.”

“By the way, I’ve been told that you secured lodgings at your destination under your name, because of Miss Lillianne’s age,” the man said, completely ignoring Treize’s remark.

“Told by whom? Oh, you must’ve called Allison. I don’t believe this...” Treize sighed.

“Yes. She was happy to tell us,” the woman said. Her husband continued.

“But we noticed that you were scheduled to stay in the smallest rooms at the cheapest hotel in the area.”

“Obviously. Allison’s paying for it, and young people shouldn’t be spending money like water anyway. The cheapest room’s good enough.”

“No, Your Highness! You may be young, but this is a trip for the two of you!” the woman said firmly, “Which is why, with Ms. Schultz’s permission, we called in earlier to reserve better rooms for you.”

“Wait... What?” Treize uttered, unable to believe his ears.

“This here is the hotel you will have ‘reserved’, sir.”

The man produced an envelope from his breast pocket and unfolded the piece of paper inside. It was a hotel pamphlet. It depicted an opulent brick building and uniformed doormen.

Treize was dumbstruck. The man put the pamphlet into his hands.

“We thought of booking two affordable single rooms, but we decided on the expensive suite with a sweeping living room and two bedrooms on either side with individual bathrooms. I suppose we may come off as nosy, but we thought it might be a little early to book the king suite.”

The pamphlet in Treize’s hands trembled.

“Not to worry, sir. We’ve told the hotel that you’re the son of a rich family, but that we couldn’t give your surname due to personal circumstances. We also told them that Miss Lillianne is your girlfriend, approved by your parents and hers. So present yourself proudly at the desk. The view from the room is spectacular, and the room itself is supposed to be very romantic. We’ve paid for your stay ahead of time. Now you can finally impress Miss Lillianne,” the woman said.

“You’ll have dinner at their four-star restaurant. Who knows? Perhaps you’ll clink glasses and pledge your future together. How romantic,” the man said.

Treize looked up from the pamphlet, glaring at the couple.

“If...if I were a real prince... I would have fired you two on the spot.”

“And also—” Ignoring Treize’s remark yet again, the man changed the subject. “Take this, Your Highness.”

From his suitcase, the man produced a gun.

“Huh?”

Treize was silenced. The weapon was a 30-centimeter miniature submachine gun. The stock was folded over the gun, and there was a magazine that held 20 rounds.

It was a fearsome weapon that could fire 20 rounds in two seconds in automatic mode.

“What the hell...”

“We’re worried that there won’t be anyone around to protect you. We contacted someone in the military and received this prototype—no one owns this model yet. We’ve also brought a large supply of bullets and magazines. Keep this with you, and if anything should happen, use it to gallantly protect Miss Lillianne—”

“I don’t need it. As if anything’s going to happen. And why a submachine gun, of all things?” Treize sighed, astonished.

“Because your favorite hunting rifles are too heavy to carry—”

“Never mind. I don’t need it. Don’t hand firearms over to someone going on vacation.”

Treize held up his hands, adamantly refusing the weapon. The man put back the submachine gun, dissatisfied. Treize continued, “And in case you were actually planning, don’t follow us all the way to the hotel.”

“Even we wouldn’t go that far, Your Highness,” the man replied, and gave his wife a look.

“Of course,” Treize said sarcastically.

The man looked him in the eye then, and said in a firm tone, “We have faith in you, Your Highness. And there’s only one piece of advice we have to offer you.”

“One? You’ve been giving me a laundry list of what to do for a while now.”

“Young man, you must contemplate!”

“No one asked, okay? Where is all this coming from?”

“Contemplate on this, contemplate on that, and continue to contemplate. Contemplate thoroughly and with all your mind, until the very end.”

“I don’t need to hear it five times, all right?”

“And even if you cannot find your answer, even after all that contemplation—”

“Then I’m still gonna learn a lesson or something, right?”

“No, sir. Even if you cannot find your answer, we are not responsible. Please try to be understanding.”

* * *

Night.

The rain had stopped and the clouds disappeared. The large, round moon rose at dusk, casting a bluish-white light over the fields and woods.

The sleeper train was a line of light traveling southwest across the land.

“Huh? Where’d the couple go?” Lillia wondered as she returned from the bathroom. The cabin had been rearranged, the seats replaced by beds. But Treize was the only one there. The old couple and even their luggage was gone.

“They moved. Apparently they ran into some acquaintances in the dining car. They took their stuff, too.”

“Huh. You didn’t kick them out or anything, Treize?” Lillia asked dubiously. Treize almost lost his composure, but he quickly played dumb.

“Why would I do that?”

“...That’s a relief, then.”

“This is their idea of being tactful, huh.”

“Did you say something?”

“Never mind.”

Treize had good reason to complain. The couple, who were residents of the hidden valley in Iks and members of the kingdom’s royal guard, had left with the meaningful words, “*We’ll leave you two alone for the night.*”

“Anyway, it looks like we can both take the bottom bunks now,” said Treize, “You take that side.”

“You’re right. Glad we don’t have to climb,” Lillia replied, and tossed her pouch of toiletries on the bed opposite Treize. Then she glanced at her leather suitcase on the shelf.

“Should I get that?”

“It’s fine.”

Lillia took off her shoes, climbed up the ladder on her bed, and narrowly managed to pull down her suitcase.

Treize, who was ready to step in if she needed help, sat on his bed and looked out the window. Reflected hazily in the glass were Lillia’s back as she opened her suitcase, and his own foolish face.

“Hmph.”

He lowered the shades in one go.

It was the middle of the night.

The train was traveling at a reduced speed. The shaking had softened, and the sound of the wheels passing over the grooves in the tracks echoed in 3/4 time.

Each of the beds in the cabin had curtains to hide the occupant. Treize was on the front side of the cabin, wearing a light T-shirt and shorts with a thin blanket over him. Suddenly, he opened his eyes.

“Huh?”

Sleepily, he raised his left arm and looked at his watch. The glow-in-the-dark hands pointed to a time still far from morning.

“I’ll just drop by the bathroom...”

Quietly, he drew his curtains open and sat up.

There was just one dim light glowing orange in the cabin. They had pulled down the shades over the window and the corridor side, so the cabin was a little dark. Putting on a pair of slippers instead of his boots, Treize quietly opened the door and left for the bathroom.

Not long afterwards,

“Yawn...”

He returned to the cabin and silently shut the door.

For a while, Treize sat blankly on his bed. The train seemed to shake more loudly than usual.

With his left hand, he adjusted the blinds and slowly changed their angle. In a single moment, white moonlight poured inside through the gaps and flooded the cabin with light. Treize quickly fumbled to adjust the angle.

He then leaned next to the window and peered outside.

“I wonder where we are.”

Outside was a flat plain tinted a bluish white. A canal ran parallel with the train, about 10 meters from the tracks. It was about 30 meters in width. Roxche, which was mostly composed of flatlands, was crisscrossed by webs of canals that had been built over the ages.

Dozens of seconds later, Treize grew tired of the unchanging scenery and turned. Then, “Whoa!”

His eyes met Lillia’s. Treize froze.

Lillia, wearing light green pajamas, had half-opened her curtains with her left hand and was staring at Treize as she lay on her side. Her eyes were half-open and she was glaring.

“Ah, sorry. I’ll just close the blinds—”

“Tomorrow’s garbage day,” Lillia said suddenly.

“Huh?”

“I know, Mom. I know.”

“What?”

Lillia closed her eyes and rolled on her back. Her left arm, propping the curtain open, fell onto her bed. Her hand was sticking out.

Realizing that Lillia was talking in her sleep, Treize breathed a sigh of relief.

“Just sleep talk, huh. I should get some rest.”

Reaching to adjust the blinds again, Treize found himself looking at the bed opposite.

There Lillia slept unguarded, her hair loose over her cheeks. Her eyes were shut tight, but her lips were slightly open.

Treize adjusted the blinds again, letting even more light seep inside.

And sitting on his bed, he leaned over. Just a single meter away from Lillia—an arm’s reach—and stared at her face for a long time.

The bluish-white cabin and the sound of the wheels.

Treize continued to stare, on and on.

The next morning.

Lillia opened her eyes to the blinding sun. The first thing she saw was the gaps between the slightly open blinds and the feet of the boy who was supposed to be sleeping in the bed across from hers.

“Whoa.”

Treize had fallen asleep as he sat, falling to his right. His upper body was on the bed, but his legs were stretched out toward Lillia. With the right side of his face smushed against his bed, Treize looked to be lost in happy sleep.

“Talk about awful sleeping habits! Who taught you to behave?!” Lillia cried indignantly. There was no answer.

“Trust me... I’ll do something...”

All she got in response was Bezelese sleep talk.

The first thing Lillia did as soon as she awoke was step down from her bed and kick Treize in the thigh.

“Hmph.”

Without mercy.

“Ow!”

Treize awoke in an instant.

Chapter 2: Tourism and Reality

The morning of the second day of the trip.

Lillia and Treize were on a boat.

The boat was a small, wooden ferry about 15 meters in length. Bench seats were lined up on the deck. Above were metal railings for propping up a canvas in case of rain. Just one step higher than the deck, at the very back of the boat, was the wheelhouse. Black smoke was rising from the smokestack.

Leaving a trail of white over the murky water, the boat slowly proceeded with the calm vibrations of the engine. Behind was Bren's harbor, which they had just left. Lillia and Treize had gotten off the train, entrusted Treize's camping gear and motorcycle to the station, and had boarded a boat bound for Lartika.

It was very early in the morning. The darkness had given way completely, but the sun had yet to rise. The sky was clear with just a few spots of clouds here and there. The massive Kurz Sea was covered by a cool morning mist. But because of the fog, it was impossible to see the horizon.

Lillia had put on her jacket and was sitting in a seat near the center of the boat, where the shaking was the least noticeable. Next to her was her leather suitcase and a duffel bag; next to them sat Treize in his leather jacket.

They were the only passengers on the morning ferry. Ahead and behind were rows upon rows of empty benches.

There was no conversation between them. The boat continued into the mist with its quiet passengers.

"Talk about one heck of an awkward silence..." Treize grumbled to himself. He glanced at Lillia, who was sitting a little far from him behind their luggage. She seemed to be enjoying the boat ride—she was staring at the prow and further ahead.

Some time passed. Then,

"Wow..."

With a gasp, Lillia beamed. Treize looked up.

"Whoa..."

Even Treize found himself gasping. Though it was before dawn, the morning fog had cleared before he realized, and the horizon was growing clear under the clear sky. And ahead was a city.

The foundation seemed to curve with the horizon as its jagged brick silhouette came into view. From the size of its apartment buildings Treize could tell they were still quite a distance away, but that also served to emphasize the size of the city.

"Welcome to Lartika!" said a middle-aged man as he suddenly came up behind them.

The man was dressed in overalls and wore a fisherman's cap. He was the captain—no, ferryman—who had checked their tickets earlier. He was also the only crew member aboard.

"Is it okay for you to leave the helm?" Treize asked.

"Just for a while, sure!" the man replied, smiling.

"Really?"

“Anyway, welcome to Lartika! It’s a little tradition I try to uphold—I say that to the passengers whenever we first catch sight of the place.”

“Thank you, captain. I’m so happy I finally get to be here,” Lillia said, truly awed.

“Glad to hear that, young lady. Foggy mornings like this mean it’ll be clear all day. We’re in for some beautiful weather.”

“Captain. The helm?” Treize repeated himself. The ferry seemed to be veering away from the city more and more.

“Hm. We’re all right for now!”

“Seriously...?”

The man continued, standing behind Lillia.

“We get a lot of honeymooners from the Capital District in Lartika. I can’t count how many happy couples I got to show this fantastic view to. You know, couples that’re moved by the same things are guaranteed to be happy!”

“Please guarantee a safe arrival for this ferry...” Treize grumbled under his breath.

“You have such a wonderful job,” Lillia said, turning. The man smiled.

“Thank you, young lady. By the way, the two of you’re the youngest couple I’ve ever ferried across. I’m honored to be guiding you two as you start your new life together.”

“Huh? No, we’re not on a honeymoon. We’re not even dating, actually. This guy’s just my luggage bearer,” Lillia declared.

“Oh. That it, young man?” The man turned to Treize.

“Yes, Captain. And would it really be too much to ask for you to get back to the helm?”

“I see. ...Good luck, young man. Your lady friend might realize how you feel, one of these days!” the captain said, returning to the wheelhouse. The boat changed heading and once more pointed at the city.

Lillia’s eyes were fixed firmly on the city. Treize complained to everyone on the boat, including himself, “...Right.”

The fortresslike city was within an arm’s reach, and its brown brick buildings were all that could be seen.

“Now that I think about it, I’d wanted to come here for my honeymoon,” Lillia muttered.

“Then...just come back again for it., Treize said without thinking.

“Stupid Treize.”

A terse reply.

“Now sit down, you two. I’m docking the boat,” the captain said lazily, docking at a pontoon bridge with a ramp placed atop a drum canister.

The 5-kilometer bridge seemed to stretch on endlessly. The captain expertly stopped the boat near the center. With a gentle impact, the boat hit the shock absorbers made of tires.

“He’s good,” Treize said to himself.

Waiting for them to make landing was a boat from the hotel.

A pair of men in suits led Lillia and Treize away from the piers. There was a staircase leading down, and below was a canal about 10 meters wide that led directly into the city.

Next to the canal was moored a small boat about 5 meters long and 2 meters wide. It was mostly black with gold trimmings, and was clearly expensive. With Lillia and Treize's luggage safely onboard, the boat's electric motor and propellers began to quietly whirr.

The streets were tranquil, though it was a little dark because of the shadows of the buildings. All they could see from the boat were the sides of the red brick buildings. But Lillia looked around in amazement all the same. Treize relaxed next to her.

Soon, the boat arrived at a large pier with a staircase. Treize looked up at the left.

"I can't believe they went this far..."

At the top of the stairs was the luxurious hotel from the pamphlet.

"People of Ikstova. I'm so sorry for this waste of your tax money," he whispered under his breath.

"Are we getting off here? Hm? Did you say something, Treize?" Lillia wondered in the midst of asking questions to a bellboy who had come to greet them.

"No, nothing. Let's go inside," Treize replied.

"Mr. Treize and Miss Lillianne Schultz, correct? We've been informed of your arrival."

"Thank you."

The hotel interior was more than a match for the outer architecture. Treize spoke to the employee at the front desk while a uniformed bellboy loaded their luggage onto a brass cart. Lillia was next to him, wide-eyed as she looked up at the chandelier.

Treize glanced at Lillia and showed her the key he received at the front. Suddenly, Lillia tugged on his arm.

"Treize, wait!"

"Wh-what is it?"

To Treize's shock, Lillia suddenly leaned into his face. She whispered, "Is it really okay to stay at such a fancy hotel? This isn't a misunderstanding, right? They don't have us confused with some other people?"

"Oh, er...it's fine! Actually, our family knows some people in the hotel business, so we get a big discount."

"All right..."

Lillia seemed to buy Treize's panicked lie. Treize continued.

"I just wanted to surprise you. Allison knows too, and she agreed with the price. So don't worry about it."

"As long as Mom's okay with it," Lillia said and looked around the lobby. Treize breathed a sigh of relief. The bellboy waited behind them, his expression blank.

Lillia and Treize were led into a simple yet elegant suite. And once the bellboy bowed and left—

"Amazing!" Lillia cried, raising her arms into the air. Treize froze for a moment before replying.

"What is? Er, wait. Yeah. It's a great suite."

"Who'd have thought I'd ever get to stay in such a fancy place?"

"Are you happy?" Treize asked hopefully as Lillia basked in the atmosphere. She turned and beamed.

“Of course I am! I don’t mind home, but sometimes you want to stay in a cushy place like this. This is splendid.”

“I’m glad you like it,” Treize replied with a smile.

“It kind of feels like I’m a princess.”

His smile faded.

“Who knows? …But I think a real princess or a prince would have a lot to struggle with. Yeah.”

“Maybe. It’s great to be a commoner!”

Watching Lillia skip around the suite, Treize muttered to himself,

“It sure is.”

Afterwards, Lillia and Treize decided on their rooms. But Lillia soon asked to switch.

“I like this one better after all. Can we trade?”

“How’s this one better?”

“The view. I like how it faces west. The sunsets must be spectacular.”

So Treize had no choice but to switch rooms.

First, they unpacked and each showered in their own bathrooms. Treize took in the view from the living room as he waited endlessly for Lillia to come out of her room.

Eventually, Lillia came outside. They had both changed out of the clothes they traveled in. Lillia had switched from her culottes to a comfortable pair of cotton pants. Treize had switched his long boots for ankle-high hiking boots, but his clothing did not look much different from before.

“…Did you even change?”

“I have multiples of the same clothes. It’s nice to not worry about what to wear.”

“…I see.”

For breakfast, they headed for the restaurant on the first floor of the hotel. They would leave to sightsee immediately afterwards, so Lillia was carrying a small bag and Treize had his belt pack.

“Is that all you’re taking?” Lillia asked. Treize was carrying a light cotton jacket instead of his usual leather one.

“Yeah. We just need our wallets, right?”

“I guess that’s the perfect outfit for my souvenir-carrier.”

“Wait, you’re going to start shopping on day one? I think we’ll have more than enough time on the last day.”

“I’m the type of girl who has to take care of all her responsibilities first.”

“What about your homework?”

“That’s a different story. It’s not a good idea to apply the same standards to everything.”

“Of course, Milady.”

At the restaurant, they were led to their seats by a waiter. On the table were clearly-expensive silverware and delicate-looking glasses.

Soon, other guests entered the restaurant as well. Lillia’s excitement at their high-class breakfast was dampened by the sight of so many well-dressed patrons in middle age or later. She whispered to Treize,

“Hey, Treize...don’t we stick out like a sore thumb?”

“Just act cool,” Treize replied without looking at her, focused on tearing off a piece of bread and buttering the surface.

“Yeah, but...”

After the bread, Treize savored a sip of his carbonated water, complete with ice and lemon slice.

“...Treize, are you by any chance from a rich family?”

“What? Wh-where’d that come from?” Treize asked, putting down his glass.

“You just look so used to places like this. You’re really good at using all this silverware, and...you look really convincing.”

“...It’s all about having confidence,” Treize said after a moment of thought.

Lillia was clearly displeased. “What, you mean I’m being too shy?”

“I don’t mean it like that. I’m just saying that as long as we have confidence, everyone will think we’re rich people, too. It’s the same at your school, right?”

“I guess. Everyone at the secondary school is rich. I mean, my family’s not poor, but they’re just on a different level.”

“But no one says anything as long as you’re a confident student, right? It’s the same thing here.”

“Hmph. Anyway, where’d you learn your table manners? From your parents?”

“Nah, my parents don’t really care about this stuff. I learned from all the uncles and aunties in the village. They’re really strict people.”

“Huh.”

“There’s nothing good about it, really. I’d love to just squirt ketchup all over the fries and eat with my hands.”

“Whoa...hey, I’m not a barbarian like you.”

“You’re the one who brought it up, Lillia.”

“Just kidding. Heh heh.”

Excited for the trip, they ate and chatted at the expensive restaurant.

Lartika was arranged like a grid. Every building was of a uniform color and style, and the streets ran perfectly straight. A large canal flowed through the center of every major street. Over the smaller, branching canals were stone arch bridges.

The roads were covered in stones that had been worn to smoothness. There wasn’t a single gasoline-powered car in sight in the city, only small electric cars. Gondolas and small boats made up the majority of transportation, and stairs leading down to the canals were everywhere.

At a wide street lined with apartments, Treize unfolded a very large map. It was the tourist’s guide he had picked up at the hotel.

“Let’s see... Streets with canals that are wide enough for motorized boats are given numbers. East-west streets have odd numbers, starting from the north, and north-south streets have even numbers, starting from the east. Right now, we’re on the southwest corner of 13 and 8. And that number at the end is probably the building number. This is a really easy system to learn. It’s a world away from the labyrinths in Ikstova.”

“You’re going to fall into a canal if you don’t take your eyes off that map,” Lillia warned from behind.

The sun had risen quite high as they walked. Behind them was the hotel, from where they had been seen courteously seen off. The hotel had offered to assign them a private tour guide, but they refused.

Treize stopped and scrutinized the map. “I expected nothing less from a tourist destination. There’s so much to see in this range alone.”

Lillia peered over.

“Over here’s an art gallery. Next to that is a history museum. There’s a big stage here for performances. They have fishing ports in the north and west, and there’s a street full of eateries next to them. Over there’s a marketplace for souvenirs. And there are piers everywhere,” Treize explained, pointing out places on the map, “They even marked out places of historic interest and facilities where you can tour buildings. There are docks for gondolas everywhere, and the wider canals have motorboat buses. They charge per person per block. And I don’t see anything that looks like an overpriced tourist trap around here,” he said, excited.

But unlike Treize, Lillia just looked around dubiously. Treize quickly noticed.

“What’s wrong?”

“Huh? No, well...” Lillia said doubtfully, “Isn’t it a little...quiet around here?”

“Now that you mention it...”

Treize looked around. The apartments lined by the hotel generally reserved their ground floors for businesses, but most of the businesses were closed. There were very few people walking along the streets, and they saw almost no gondolas on the canals.

“I swear I saw more tourists than this when I saw Lartika on the news as a kid. This doesn’t make sense. It’s *summertime*,” Lillia said, “I saw this place on a color television about 10 years ago. The city looks the same but there were a lot more people around, and I couldn’t even count all the gondolas on the canals. There were open-air stalls on every street, too. It was more lively than this.”

“You think maybe the captain brought us to the wrong place?” Treize joked, but Lillia was silent. “...Let’s look around a bit more. There’s a street full of souvenir stands just two blocks ahead. Wanna check it out?”

This time, Lillia nodded.

“This way.”

She began to walk with Treize.

“Are you sure this is the place?” Lillia asked.

“Yep,” Treize replied.

They were standing on a mid-sized road with no canal running down the middle. The road was lined with small, square brick buildings reminiscent of workshops or warehouses. The first floor of every building was a business. Sunshades and signs lined the walls. There was a sign that read, ‘Souvenir Market Street West’.

“It’s quiet.” “I wonder if they’ve already closed for the day,” Lillia and Treize mumbled. This street also was noticeably lethargic. The shutters were closed on about half the businesses.

Although there were some open-air cafes by the street, there weren't more than one or two people in the seats. There were some—but not many—tourists around.

"W-well, it's still morning. And it's just the start of summer break, too," Treize theorized in vain as Lillia remained silent.

Eventually, she began to walk. Treize followed.

After briefly examining a show window, Lillia began to walk again. There was a sign labeled 'CLOSING SOON' on the door of a wooden doll workshop she was interested in.

She began to walk again. Treize quietly followed.

After looking at about a dozen stores, Lillia finally entered one souvenir shop. It sold cups, plates, small brooches, and other ceramic trinkets. The store was open.

"Oh my! Welcome, welcome."

The bell on the door chimed; a woman in her mid-forties looked up and greeted the two with a smile. The store was stuffed full of souvenirs.

"Can we take a look?"

"Be my guest. Take your time."

Lillia looked a little happier as the shopkeeper described the products to her. Treize shrugged lightly.

Eventually, Lillia's shopping basket was full of small accessories like brooches, pins, and badges. She put them in a wisteria-weave basket and took them to the counter. She paid the shopkeeper, who put the souvenirs in a paper bag, and received her change.

"Thank you. It's been a while since I last had customers—and a young lady, to boot. Please, come again."

"...Er, I have a question. Are there not as many people here as before?"

The shopkeeper nodded many times. "That's right. We used to get so many more tourists."

And as if on cue, she began to explain passionately about the state of the city.

That she had been doing business for over 30 years, but the number of visitors began to drop around the time the war with Sou Be-II came to an end. That the drop became even more pronounced in the past 10 years. That locals blamed the aeroplane industry, which enabled people from the Capital District to travel further from their homes.

"There's another reason, actually. Iks."

Treize looked up. He silently turned his gaze from the plates on the wall to the two women.

"You two are from the Capital District, yes? Isn't Iks the most popular destination now?"

"Well...probably," Lillia replied. She had visited Iks almost every year since she was old enough to remember, and was almost sick of it.

"People used to come to Lartika before. But now it's all about Iks. *Everyone's* off to Iks. Apparently it's the mountains. After it took first place in a poll, Iks only became more famous and drained Lartika's popularity. That's what everyone says. That it's stealing our tourists. Did you know? Before Iks came into the spotlight, half the Confederation's tourism budget came to Lartika. But we lost most of it because Queen What's-her-name of Iks is so young and beautiful."

Treize quietly listened to the shopkeeper complaining to Lillia.

“Tolcasia isn’t a very fertile country. All we have is a lakeshore lined with trees you can barely use for firewood. Our agricultural and fishing industries aren’t very profitable, either. That’s why children from poorer families have always come to Lartika to make money. They’d work in souvenir workshops or do porter work. Their cheap labor was what sustained the city. Children from slums by the lakeshore can’t even afford the ferry, so they make boats of their own or swim to Lartika clinging to driftwood.”

“I see...”

“That’s how desperate they are for money. There were some jobs for them, at least, back when our tourism industry was flourishing. But now that the tourists are gone, those children can’t find a job anywhere. Some resort to pickpocketing or mugging just to survive. Even if they’re caught and sent back where they came from, they return. But the politicians in the Capital District won’t do a thing to help us.”

“I had no idea...” Lillia said, upset.

“Oh dear. I didn’t mean to sound like I was blaming you two. Please cheer up. You came all this way to visit Lartika, and you even gave me some business. You have no idea how grateful I am. I’m so sorry if I offended you,” the talkative shopkeeper said.

“No, not at all. I’m glad I got to understand the situation a little better.”

“Please, come again.”

“Thank you. Have a good day,” Lillia said, and turned. Treize nodded lightly at the shopkeeper.

“Thank you.”

With the shopkeeper’s voice behind them, Lillia and Treize stepped out into the street. It was still as empty as ever—the city did not look like a tourist destination at the peak of vacation season.

The moment Treize began to walk,

“What a talkative lady,” Lillia said brightly from behind him.

But Treize did not answer.

“Hmph.” Lillia lightly kicked him in the rear.

“Whoa! What’re you doing?” Treize stumbled, turning around.

“Don’t start moping like that! I bet you’re blaming yourself right now, am I right?”

“Ah— ... Yeah.”

Shocked, Treize nodded slightly.

“Do you have any idea how worried I was that you’d *apologize* to the lady while we were in there?”

“I wouldn’t—”

“Don’t worry about it! It’s not your fault. Iks is such a popular place because the queen and the people worked so hard for it. I grew up seeing that with my own two eyes.”

Lillia pointed at Treize. She seemed to have gotten back her energy—she was almost back to her usual self.

Treize smiled. “All right. I got it.”

“Good!”

“Where to next? More shopping?”

“Of course. I’m going to try and get all my shopping done today. Let’s go find some scarves,” Lillia replied, walking off again.

“All right. Let’s go.”

It was nearly noon. The shadows were almost disappearing underfoot.

“This should be about enough. I checked off everything on my list. I think I have everything,” Lillia said, placing her hands on her hips.

“I can’t carry any more anyway...” Treize replied, five paper bags hanging from his right arm, four from his left arm, and three large boxes on top of his arms. They were walking down a narrow alleyway that had no canal. With no windows on the walls around them, it was like walking through a little valley.

“Whoa...”

Treize caught the top box with his chin as it began to slide away. A droplet of sweat ran down his forehead.

“Don’t complain. We’re going back to the hotel now.”

“Okay. But before that...did you notice?”

Lillia nodded slightly. And she continued to walk slowly as she replied, “That kid’s following us.”

“Yeah. And I get the feeling he’s not here to help me with the souvenirs.”

A small figure stirred in the street corner about 20 meters behind Treize. The child was about 10 years old. He was wearing a messy brown shirt and long black pants. His eyes glinted under his short-billed cap as he stared at Lillia and Treize.

“You think he’s a pickpocket?”

“Probably. We’re in a deserted alley now, so I think he might make a move soon.”

“Even if he does...I’m sure you’ll manage, Treize.”

“With all this stuff in my arms? I can toss it all and chase away the kid, but you’re gonna lose at least a couple of things if I do that.”

“No way. I can’t just go up to my friends and tell them, ‘Sorry, the souvenirs I bought for you got stolen’.”

“No.”

“And how could I tell them that the guy I went on vacation with ended up being totally useless?”

“By that, you mean me.”

“If you let the kid do what he wants, yeah.”

“That won’t do. Then what? Should I take out a gun and fire warning shots? I’d run if I were him.”

“That’s a good idea. But you don’t have a gun, do you?”

“Then how about I warn him, ‘You’d better not make this girl mad. She’s got a pretty horrifying violent streak’.”

“...Are you *asking* me to kick you again?”

“Can we run?”

“No.”

“Then...”

They continued to discuss ideas as they walked down the alley. The buildings seemed to end a little further ahead, but it was hard to see what was in the light beyond.

The boy came out from behind the corner and quickly walked up to them.

“He’s here. Do something.”

“Like what...?”

Lillia stopped. Treize stopped as well, and caught the sliding boxes again.

Turning, Lillia glared at the child. He came up to them anyway. There were now only 10 meters between them.

“Hey, where’re you two going? There’s nothing there that way,” said the child.

“Huh?” Lillia furrowed her brow.

“There’s nothing but the lake out there. I’ve been watching you for a bit. Where are you trying to go?”

“What?”

Lillia and Treize exchanged glances. Then they looked at the child.

“What do you mean?”

At the end of the alleyway, obscured by the light, was the lake. The edge of the buildings was also the edge of the city and land. Lillia and the boy stood there.

“You were right.”

“I followed you ‘cause I was wondering why you’d go this way,” the boy said.

“I see. Thank you,” Lillia replied, going back down the alleyway with him.

Treize was waiting with all her souvenirs. “Did we make a wrong turn?” he asked.

“Completely. This is the northern edge of town,” Lillia said, and turned to the boy. “I’m sorry. We were scared that you were going to do something bad.”

“What? Like pickpocketing?”

“Well...yeah.”

“I would never!” the boy said angrily. Lillia apologized again.

“We know now. We’re really sorry.”

“I mean, I found out that doing stuff like that isn’t worth the effort.”

“What?”

“Pickpocketing, I mean. If the city police catches you, you’ll be locked up for three days. And then they kick you out of Lartika. It’s just not worth it.”

“Which means you must have tried it before,” Treize said snidely. The boy ignored him.

“Anyway, I gave up on doing stuff that’ll get me arrested. From now on, I’m using my brains. You two should hire me! Just give me a bit of money, and I’ll show you around! I’ll introduce you to all the best restaurants!”

The boy looked up expectantly at Lillia. She stared back. Then she turned to Treize.

“What do we do?”

“It’s up to you. Although I, for one, welcome the chance to finally get to the hotel without making another wrong turn.”

The boy asked Lillia for the name of the hotel. When Lillia told him, his eyes turned to dinner plates. “Wow. That’s a really fancy place, y’know. Guess you can’t judge a book by its cover.”

Then, the boy offered them a price for guiding them that distance.

“Hm...all right. Better than getting lost again.”

“All right! Negotiation complete!” the boy cheered.

“But we’re not paying you until we reach the hotel.”

“Tch. Talk about cheap. So I can’t just take the money and run.”

“Is that what you were planning?” Treize groaned. Lillia ignored him.

“Let’s get going before my friend gets flattened under the souvenirs.”

“My name is Lillia, and this is Treize. What’s your name?”

“It’s my personal policy to never tell passing acquaintances my name. Cause it makes it sadder when we say goodbye, you know? So I’m not gonna call your names, either. I’m just gonna call you big bro and big sis.”

“Talk about cheeky. Looks like Lillia’s gonna have to teach you a lesson.”

“Quiet, Treize. —All right, then. You can tell us your name when you feel like it.”

“*If I feel like it.*”

Guided by the boy, Lillia and Treize passed through alleyways and crossed bridges to finally reach the hotel. They never had to take a numbered street. They must have cut through the shortest distance possible.

“What do you think?” the boy said proudly.

“That was amazing. You’re really good,” Lillia praised him.

“All right. Where’s my pay?”

“You did a good job. I’ll keep my end of the bargain—”

“Feel free to give me a tip, too.”

“A tip? I’m surprised someone your age knows about that stuff. Here you are.”

“Tch.”

From her purse, Lillia took out a single coin marked with a leaf. But just as she held it out to the boy—

“Hey, you!” someone roared.

“Whoa.”

“The boy snatched the coin from Lillia and bolted. Then came the screech of a whistle.

“Hold it right there!”

The voices belonged to police officers dressed in dark blue uniforms. There were two of them, both in their thirties—and both passed by Lillia and Treize and chased down the boy.

“What’s going on?”

“Who knows?”

As Treize (still carrying an armful of souvenirs) and Lillia watched, the officers caught the boy. One of them grabbed the struggling boy by the back of the collar.

“Hold still!”

“Let me go! I didn’t do anything!”

One of the officers dragged the screaming boy to Lillia. The other said, “This boy just stole your money, didn’t he, Miss?”

Lillia immediately shook her head. “No. He just showed us how to get here, so I wanted to compensate him. It’s proper payment.”



“Yeah! It’s all proper!”

The officer ignored the boy. “That is illegal, I’m afraid.”

“What?”

“In this city, it is illegal to give directions or introduce lodgings for pay unless you are an officially registered city guide. And there’s no way a child like this could be a guide. He shouldn’t be charging money for his services.”

“But he still helped us out,” Lillia pointed out, but the officer’s reply was final.

“That may be true. But if we let this one slide, countless children from nearby villages will flock here and do exactly what this boy just did. We already have a surplus of children from other towns mugging and pickpocketing from tourists. What if those children extort money from tourists, or if they fail to find work and end up turning to worse crimes? That would make the city less safe for tourists, when we’re already hard pressed for visitors.”

Lillia could say nothing. The officer forced the boy’s hand open and took back the coin.

“This belongs to you,” he said, handing the coin to Lillia. She took it, astonished.

“Enjoy your stay, then.”

As the officers left with the boy in tow, Lillia stopped them. “Wait. What are you going to do with him?”

“We’ll send him back home if possible, but—”

“As if! I don’t have a home! We were so poor my parents had to kick me out!” the boy howled.

Sympathy rose to the officers’ eyes, then disappeared. One of them said in a detached tone, “As for children who have nowhere to return, we send them to a facility in a village a little further from here.”

“What?! What facility?!”

The other officer scolded the boy, telling him to quiet down, and took him away. The remaining officer explained.

“It’s a facility where children are supported until they can become independent. It provides a comfortable living environment and education to children who cannot go to school, and helps them find job opportunities in bigger cities, like the Capital District.”

“Is that facility...all right?” Lillia asked. The officer nodded.

“Of course. It’s been in operation for 20 years now. A man we call ‘Master’ worked very hard to establish this facility on his own. There are more kids there these days because Lartika’s tourism industry’s in a bit of a slump, but...please try to understand. We’re doing what we can, as well.”

“I see...”

“If you’ll excuse me. Please, enjoy your stay.”

The officer departed.

Lillia said nothing, staring at the coin in her hand before stuffing it into her jacket.

Lillia and Treize were at the hotel restaurant. Just like at breakfast, they sat at a fancy table with polished silverware and glasses before them, and were dressed in casual outfits while surrounded by adults in formal clothes.

They dug in as though all of that was completely normal. Lillia ordered fish meunière and salad, and Treize ordered beef cutlet and minestrone soup. Both meals were served with bread.

“Phew.”

Polishing off her plate with incredible speed, Lillia took a sip of water and slammed her glass on the table.

“...Are you trying to eat away your frustration?” Treize wondered, hand stopping partway through silent sips of his soup.

“No,” Lillia said brusquely.

“All right, then.”

Eventually, Treize finished as well. The waiter brought them dessert. Vanilla ice cream and cranberry ice cream served in beautiful glass bowls. Mint leaves and small biscuits were stuck in the scoops.

“...This, too,” Lillia said, taking a spoonful, “This is gonna help the city’s economy, right?”

“Yeah,” Treize replied, scooping ice cream into his mouth, “It’s good.”

“Say, Treize?”

“Hm?”

Lillia drew zigzags in her ice cream with the tip of her spoon, not looking him in the eye. “I feel like I’m in the wrong city.”

Treize waited for the ice cream to melt in his mouth before he replied,

“It’s not your fault, Lillia.”

“I know,” Lillia said immediately.

Treize put down his spoon. “Now that we’ve gotten the shopping over with, do you want to go somewhere outside Lartika? My motorcycle’s back in Bren, so we can go wherever you want.”

Lillia looked up, a little surprised. “Is that why you brought it?”

“No, but...” Treize shook his head.

“Forget Lartika and go camping, you mean?”

“I’m joking around, Lillia. We still have places to see here, right?”

“I’ll think about it.”

“Anyway, for now—”

“Yeah?”

“—Let’s finish the ice cream before it melts.”

“Yeah. Everything they serve here is really good,” Lillia mumbled, taking another spoonful, “It really is.”

Chapter 3: Tour Planes and Fighter Planes

<Yes, this is the Enterhail 4th Farm Machinery Factory. This factory ceased operations last year and is currently closed. We only take telephone enquiries. How can I help you?>

<I know that the factory has ceased operations. I'm just calling to get the local weather forecast. What will the weather be like from tomorrow afternoon to evening?>

<I'm afraid I can't answer that question. Perhaps you should give the local newspaper a call. Do you have any other business?>

<Grapes on the left. 9399 of 87. 553. The firewood has been stacked in the backyard. The fox is not nearby.>

<...Confirmed. This is a top-secret line. This is the 2nd Special Flight Test Center in Sector 4 of the Roxcheanuk Confederation Air Force. State your name.>

<Major Watts of the Air Force Intelligence Department. Please connect me to Captain Allison Schultz, who is currently staying at the base as a test pilot.>

<One moment, please. —Captain Schultz had an early-morning test flight session and is currently asleep. Would you like to leave a message?>

<I'd like to speak to her directly. Please wake her at once.>

<Pardon? I—>

<Please wake her up.>

<One moment, please.>

<Hello? This is Sergeant Maggie Eatner, assistant to Captain Schultz. The captain is currently resting in the lounge.>

<I understand. Could you wake her?>

<But...>

<This is an emergency. Please wake her at once.>

<But it might take some time...>

<I understand that it might be difficult to wake her. The beds in the lounge are foldable, correct? Collapse the back in one go. And run as fast as you can to take cover, Sergeant. Captain Schultz will be awake within the minute.>

<What? Er...yes, of course. Force her awake, huh...man, I hate my job...>

<I can hear you, Sergeant.>

<Yes! This is Captain Schultz. Who's calling? Apologies, but I only just woke up and forgot your name.>

<Allison. It's me.>

<Huh? Wi- er, oh! Excuse me, sir! It's been a while!>

<I'm calling from the Sou Be-Il embassy. This line is safe.>

<Is that so, sir? Please excuse me!>

<I have urgent matters to discuss. It's about the lady and the prince.>

<Yes, sir?>

<Listen carefully to what I say.>

<Then shall I call back from my end, sir?>

<Please.>

<I see. So that's the sinister plot, huh. And near Lartika, of all places. This isn't good.>

<I'm in charge of the cleanup, so you don't have to worry. But there's something I need you to do. I think you'll be able to intercept their radio transmissions. Keep an ear out, and if anything happens, contact Roxche's Intelligence Department. I want to keep those two out of the plot at all costs.>

<All right. I'll warn them if I hear anything. And I'll call those two tonight at the hotel.>

<I'm counting on you. Just make sure they don't board any aeroplanes while they're there.>

<Aeroplanes, huh. They'll be fine. I mean, why would they spend all that money when they both grew up flying to their hearts' content?>

<I hope you're right...>

<I understand that you're worried, but did you seriously contact me just to tell me that? You called on a secure line and all...>

<Oh, and there's something else.>

<Yeah!>

<If we need support, the Confederation Air Force might send a request to your base. It's the closest one to the area with a unit under direct command.>

<Huh? Oh, *that*. All right, all right. Gotta follow orders and bring home the bacon.

Hmph.>

<Sorry, Allison. But I'm glad you're there.>

<Sure, sure. I'd love to chat, but you have to get going, right?>

<Yeah. I have to go soon.>

<All right. I'm going back to bed. See you later.>

<And one last thing...>

<Hm?>

<I love you so much, Allison.>

* * *

Just as Allison hopped around the empty room in glee,

Lillia and Treize were looking up at a sign.

It was afternoon. The bright sun was shining on a south-facing sign.

Painted in large print on the 3-meter sign were the words, 'You too can be a pilot! Go on a tour flight.'

Underneath were the words,

'Take a walk through the air on one of our floatplanes! The seats are open to the air, just like a convertible. Feel the wind in your hair as you look down at Lartika from above! We offer rental flight suits, hats, and goggles. Up to two passengers per plane. This business is part of Lartika's Public Tourism Department. We also offer photography services. (Additional fees apply.)'

Lillia and Treize silently stared at the sign.

The sign was on the corner of a prominent intersection. They had left the hotel after lunch to see more of the city, leaving the souvenirs in the suite and carrying just a small bag and a belt pack respectively.

Treize turned to Lillia.

Lillia met his gaze. "Wanna try?"

Treize was silent.

"Well?"

"Lillia..."

"What?"

"You're thinking what I'm thinking, right?"

"...Say it. What?"

"We're both thinking, 'It's no fun getting on an aeroplane if I'm not flying it. Do we really have to pay so much money to watch someone else fly? But it's been a while since the last time I flew, so I guess it might be nice'."

"...Yeah. Exactly," Lillia replied.

Treize thought for a moment. "I don't mind trying it out."

"You 'don't mind'? So you don't mind if we don't, either?" Lillia asked, looking into Treize's face.

"No, well, I do want to try it. Er...I actually really want to. If we're not too pressed for time...wanna give it a shot, Lillia?"

"I guess I don't have a choice. I'll go with you. Normally, I'd never pay money to sit in the back, but I'll show you that I can be considerate to my traveling companion sometimes."

"It's an honor, Milady."

"But..."

"But?"

"We're not going on the tour if the pilot and the plane aren't good enough. If the plane's too old, or if the pilot's not that good, for example."

"I feel the same way. Let's get going. Which way?"

Lillia read out the numbers written on the sign and asked Treize for the location.

And just as Treize took out the map and opened it,

"Give it here."

Lillia impatiently snatched it out of his hands.

Lillia and Treize took a water taxi to the wharf on the western side of town.

It was a port where boats bound for villages to the southwest of the lake were moored. The floatplane tour hangar was just north of the area, according to the map and the arrow-shaped signs in the wharf area.

Lillia and Treize could see the horizon to their left. Past the railings, just a meter underneath, was the lake's surface. To their right were warehouses marked with numbers. They were massive, each one over 30 meters wide.

"Warehouse 8."

"I know."

Warehouse 8 was where they came to a stop. It was the only warehouse without safety rails along the lake and the only one with a ramp into the water. Two lines of cog-like teeth ran along the ramp. At the edge of the railings was a long pole from which hung a flag, used to tell wind direction. It was fluttering from west to south.

On the door by the warehouse was a small sign that read, 'Tour plane hangar'.

Treize and Lillia exchanged glances, nodded, and knocked.

"Excuse us. We'd like to try a tour flight."

They could hear someone thundering over. The door quickly opened.

"It's been a while since I last had customers. Come in, come in!"

Opening the door was a kindly-looking man in his fifties. He was slightly plump and had short hair, and was wearing a grey flight suit. The top of his suit was undone and wrapped around his waist, exposing his tank top and chest hair.

"Hello," Lillia said, taken slightly aback.

"Ah. Sorry, Miss," the man apologized, and put on his suit properly. He introduced himself as Mateo and led the duo inside.

Through the door was a room built inside the warehouse. The walls and ceiling were made of white plywood, and there was a naked lightbulb hanging from the ceiling. In the middle of the room were sofas and a table, and in the corner was a desk with a half-empty cup. Blinds covered what few windows there were, and there was another door on the opposite side of the room.

"Come on in. We have to talk before we start anything."

"Thank you. Where is the floatplane? Is it through there?"

"Yeah. It was raining so hard yesterday I had to bring her in. Let me show you."

Mateo reached for one of the blinds, but stopped and went over to the door instead. He opened it and gestured over his excited customers.

Lillia and Treize stepped through the door. It was cool in the warehouse. The lightbulbs hanging from the scaffolding overhead came to life, one after another.

Inside the warehouse was a plane.

"A floatplane! This is cool. So we get to ride on one of these?" Lillia wondered.

A floatplane differed from a seaplane in that there were pontoons underneath the fuselage. Seaplanes used the fuselage itself for buoyancy.

The floatplane was about 10 meters long, and the pontoons were mounted on carts so the plane could move on land. Lillia and Treize could see the cart, the pontoons, and the support stand underneath. The fuselage at the top was quite high up.

On the plane's sharp nose was a four-bladed propeller. Being a biplane, the craft had wings atop and under the fuselage, and the engine jutted in front of the wings. The upper wing was positioned slightly closer to the front, and there were three seats. Each seat was covered only by a simple windshield, leaving the passengers and pilots exposed from the shoulders up.

The tops of the wings, the fuselage, and the pontoons were painted a dark green. The undersides were white. On the sides of the fuselage were the crest of the Roxchean military, the Spear of Seron. The emblems were peeling slightly. On the fin was the name of the city, Lartika.

“She’s a real beauty, eh? This is the plane we use,” Mateo said proudly. He, Lillia, and Treize looked up at the plane. “She used to be an over-water scouter craft in the Air Force until not too long ago. She can even make long-distance flights. A real hardy girl, her.”

“Are you from the Air Force?” Lillia asked.

Mateo nodded. “Yep. Used to pilot scouters back in the day. I flew the old girl over the North Sea to keep an eye out on Western ships. Sometimes the weather was lethal and sometimes it was freezing; but for some reason, even when things got dicey, it felt like I’d be able to pull through so long as she was with me. Which is exactly what happened. All thanks to her,” Mateo said, lightly tapping on the metal pontoons.

“Did you leave because they downsized the military?”

“You’re a clever one, Missy. A few years after the war ended, the military suddenly said they didn’t need me. I’d been flying ever since I first entered the Air Force—I was a little sad to think I’d never fly an aeroplane again. I came back home to Tolcasia and worked the land for a while. But suddenly, the city started up this aeroplane tour business and hired me. I was floored when I saw the old girl floating on the lake! I was so moved, I started crying. Me and her both, we were kicked out of the military and ended up here. But now we take relaxing strolls in the air and give people tours. Better than anything I could have asked for.”

Lillia looked at the emotional Mateo, then met Treize’s eyes. Treize nodded lightly. Lillia did as well.

“That’s wonderful, Mr. Mateo. Then could you give us a ride today?”

Sitting on a sofa in the lounge, Lillia and Treize listened to Mateo explain the costs and regulations. The tour was by no means cheap, but Lillia readily paid for it.

“We’ve come this far, so we might as well.”

She also wrote down her name and address in case of emergency. Treize used her address and put down only his given name.

Then Mateo made a phone call, and several men in work wear ran over and helped pull the floatplane out of the warehouse. They slid open the doors, and light hit the fuselage.

Lillia and Treize were handed all kinds of gear. It was all necessary to protect them from the cold. Customer-use one-piece flight suits, leather aviator jackets, aviator hats with built-in headsets, goggles, white mufflers, and gloves. Mateo was about to explain how to put them on, but Lillia and Treize were already putting on the flight suits over their clothes. With practiced hands they finished putting on the gear, secured their sleeves and belt, and put microphones around their necks. Lillia tucked in her hair under her jacket and put on the hat.

“You two’re old hands at this,” Mateo said, pleasantly surprised.

“That’s right,” Lillia replied a little proudly. Treize said nothing, tightening the strap on his goggles.

Lillia agreed to leave her bag in the lounge, taking only her wallet with her. Treize’s belt pack was still around his waist.

“Well, let’s climb aboard. The weather’s great today, and there’s no fog or wind. Perfect for flying,” Mateo said, also putting on a leather jacket and holding an aviator hat, “I’ll take the cockpit up front. Pick your seats, you two. The last seat has the better view, since it’s supposed to be for communications.”

Lillia immediately chose the second seat.

“All right, then.”

Treize accepted her decision.

The fuselage was positioned rather high, so it was a 3-meter climb up to the seats. Mateo first climbed up the pontoons and stepped onto the fuselage via the steps near the bottom and middle of the plane. Then, he stepped on the lower wing to climb into the cockpit.

“You sure you won’t need any ladders?”

“We’re fine, thank you.”

Lillia also expertly climbed up to the second seat. Treize followed, taking the last seat. Three heads were lined up in a row down the length of the fuselage.

There were sturdy belts on each seat to secure the occupants. The men in work wear came up to help Lillia and Treize, but they had already securely fastened themselves in.

One of the men checked Mateo’s belt in the cockpit and said, “All seats clear. Preparations complete.”

“Haven’t had customers this easy to work with in a while,” Mateo said to himself.

It was time to connect the radio. When Lillia and Treize put on their aviator hats, the headphones came right over their ears. If they plugged them into a port by the seat, they could communicate with the others on the plane.

<This is Mateo. Miss Lillia, Mr. Treize, can you hear me?> Mateo asked.

<All clear.> <All clear,> Lillia and Treize replied immediately.

<Excellent.>

Working the control stick between his knees and the pedals underneath, Mateo adjusted the rudders on the plane’s wings.

The plane was in good working condition. Mateo gestured to the men that everything was clear, and pressed the talk button. <All clear. We’re heading out now. Just to warn you ahead of time, this plane’s going to shake hard enough to hurt your rear. Sorry for the inconvenience.>

<Does it shake when you lift off the water?> Lillia asked.

<No, but it will when we go down to the lake from the ground,> Mateo replied.

The fuselage shook up and down amidst the screaming of cogs

Loaded on a cart, the floatplane slowly emerged from the warehouse and descended the ramp. The lines on the ramp were part of a device that raised and lowered the cart. One of the men was in the warehouse, vigorously turning a large handle.

The tips of the pontoons touched the water. Soon, the entire fuselage was on the lake. Two men pushed the plane as hard as they could; the floatplane was now 3 meters from the ramp. It floated alone by the perfectly-cut lakeshore by the rows of warehouses.

<We’re finally off. I can’t wait,> Lillia said.

<Well, let’s get started.>

Mateo pressed the ignition switch.

With the wail of a monstrous bird being strangled, the impingement starter began to move.

Then came ignition. Unlike a car, there was nothing to muffle the deafening roar of the engine. The vicinity of the floatplane was quickly drowned in noise, and the fuselage began to

vibrate. At the same time, the propeller began to spin. The plane slowly taxied over the water. The wind from the propeller traveled down the fuselage and rushed past Lillia's and Treize's faces.

Lillia turned to Treize. With goggles over their eyes, they exchanged smiles instead of words.

The plane slowly slid over the murky water on its pontoons. It turned southward and followed the shore of stone and brick, maintaining a distance of about 30 meters.

<I usually head toward the south harbor when I'm warming up the engine.>

<In case the engine fails?>

<No, to advertise to the people waiting for boats. A lot of people are still afraid of flying, you see. Could you give them a friendly wave when we pass by?>

<Sure.>

When they drew near the pier, the plane slowly turned to the right. And when the fuselage was pointed to the side, Lillia and Treize waved to several people on the pier.

<Well, we're off. Don't touch the control stick or the pedals, Miss.>

<Got it.>

Mateo grabbed the throttle lever on the left and pulled it all the way. The roar of the engine grew even louder, sending stronger vibrations throughout the fuselage. A second later, the plane sped up a notch. All three people onboard were pressed against their seats.

All Treize could see were the shaking heads of the people in front of him. Because the plane was taxiing over water with the nose slightly raised, he could not see the horizon. Treize turned his head. The reddish-brown city of Lartika was growing smaller behind them.

The floatplane thundered over the lake—a spray of water rose from behind the pontoons and scattered in the propeller winds.

Then, the pontoons left the water. The spray of water instantly dissipated, and the floatplane's wake shrank behind them. They took to the air and rose in a gentle arc.

About 300 meters in the air, Mateo said, <I'm banking left. We'll be flying over the city.>

Slowly, the floatplane tilted. And it continued to fly in a wide turn. To the left underneath was Lartika—a reddish-brown box floating on the lake. Beyond it was the lakeshore and the green land.

When they flew out of the turn, Lartika was before them like a massive castle. The floatplane ascended and flew over the city. It was so large that it almost felt like the plane was stopped in midair and Lartika was gliding toward it.

Engine buzzing, the floatplane soared over the reddish-brown city. Its square-and-rectangular blocks slowly passed them by.

<What do you think? Isn't Lartika beautiful from up here?> Mateo asked Lillia and Treize, who were both looking down.

<Yes! It almost looks like a toy made of blocks!> <It's wonderful. I'm really glad we came on this tour,> they replied.

<Would you like to fly over the city one more time?>

<Before we land, sure. But I'd like to fly a little higher over the lake.>

<And you, Mr. Treize?>

<Oh, you can ignore me while we're on the plane. Apparently my opinions don't matter or something.>

<All right, then. We'll fly over the lake. I'm banking left again.>

With that, the aeroplane tilted far to the left. The nose was pointed at the center of the massive lake, where sunlight shone and scattered.

2000 meters in the air.

<There's really nothing like flying!>

<You're right. And judging from what you just said, Miss Lillia, I suppose you and Mr. Treize have been on more than just passenger crafts.>

Lillia and Mateo were enjoying their conversation. The floatplane hummed vibrantly as it soared over a clear view of the entire horizon.

<That's right. Although I can't tell you how.>

<That's fine by me. I won't pry.>

<So, er...I have a request.>

<Hm?>

"That's why she took the second seat," Treize muttered without holding down the talk button. The wind and the noise overpowered his voice completely, preventing the others from hearing.

<Could you let me take the controls for a bit?>

"As if he'd let her," Treize mumbled. But—

<Sure,> Mateo replied immediately. Treize was flabbergasted.

<Really?> Lillia asked, surprised.

<I used to be a flight instructor back in the day. You can tell who's got experience or not just by having them sit in the back. And you seem like an expert yourself, Miss Lillia. Can your family by any chance afford an aeroplane? I suppose you got a chance to take the controls in midair then?>

<Amazing! That's almost correct,> Lillia replied, genuinely impressed.

<And you too, Mr. Treize. Looks to me like you've gone flying by yourself before.>

<That's right,> Treize replied.

But Lillia did not explain that she had flown, not a private aircraft, but fighters and bombers from the Confederation Air Force.

<Then I really can, right?>

<Sure, if it's just in midair. I'll take the controls right away if things get dicey. But no fancy aerobatics, you hear? Maintain altitude between 1000 and 1500. And don't let the throttle lever go into the red when you bank,> Mateo said, and looked back.

<All right! Thank you! All clear to go.> Lillia smiled, putting her hands on the control stick and her foot over the pedal.

<Then it's all yours, Miss Lillia. You're the pilot now.>

<Yeah!>

Lillia flew to her heart's content over the massive lake. At first, she made wide turns to keep Mateo calm, then returned to level position and circled in the opposite direction.

<Excellent. Let loose a bit more, if you'd like.>

Empowered by Mateo's permission, Lillia made steeper turns and ascended and descended.

<Man, flying sure is great.>

<You're good at this, Miss Lillia. Whoever taught you must be an ace.>

<Thank you. This plane's a really sweet girl,> Lillia replied, and banked to the right. The horizon tipped to the left, and they could see sunlight glinting off the water to their right.

<Wow! This is fun!>

"Good for you," Treize groaned as he listened to Lillia's cheering from his seat, where there were no controls.

Once Lillia had had her fill of flying, Mateo informed her that they were almost out of time. Lillia thanked him and relinquished the controls. Mateo banked a full 90 degrees into a turn, and pointed the nose straight at Lartika.

<Let's head back, now.>

With three people aboard, the floatplane slowly and quietly descended.

<Times sure have changed,> Mateo said without warning. <Ah, just talking to myself. I don't think about anything else these days, so I always end up saying it out loud.>

<What do you mean, times have changed?> Lillia asked.

<Well, in the old days I always thought I'd die flying. That one of these days there'd be a big war and I'd go out to fight for Roxche.>

<You won't have to worry about that now.>

<That's right. And that's wonderful. The very day I had that thought, I came back to the base after a long flight, and there was an uproar. It was the day they announced the Mural discovery. Before the two of you were born, probably.>

<I learned about it in history class back in primary school. A pilot from Sou Be-II found the Mural when he got stranded, and announced the discovery.>

<History, eh. That's a perfect example of how one little stroke of fortune can change the world. That discovery gave tens of thousands of people *years* more of life. Including me.>

<It's such a relief. We wouldn't be flying here otherwise.>

Treize decided to chime in.

"Mr. Mateo. The parents of the girl behind you are brave people who're responsible for most of that, though history doesn't know it. The true heroes, whom almost no one will ever know about. And the boy behind her's the decently nice son of two other people who know a lot of things about them."

However, he did not hold down the talk button.

The floatplane was slowly flying over the sky. Lillia basked in the wind, and Treize lowered his seat to take shelter behind the windshield, nearly asleep and his eyes closed.

<Let me bank a bit,> Mateo said, banking to the right. The plane flew at 45 degrees as it crossed the sky.

Several seconds later, Mateo returned the plane to level position.

<Miss Lillia. Mr. Treize. We're going to have to take a short detour. Don't worry—I won't charge you extra if we take too long. And we have plenty of fuel.>

<Understood,> Treize said, opening his eyes.

<All right. Is something the matter?> Lillia asked.

<I just saw something on the lake—a small boat or a seaplane, I think. There shouldn't be anyone out fishing in this time of year, so I'm worried they might be stranded. I'd like to go check on them—this is part of my job.>

<Okay.>

<If they *are* stranded, they owe their lives to you, Miss Lillia. I don't usually fly over this area,> Mateo said, quickly descending. He made a hard turn and flew about 100 meters across the water. The surface of the lake was as smooth as glass as it passed endlessly by the plane. And eventually, a floatplane came into view on their left.

They turned their heads.

It was a small monoplane about 9 meters long. There was one large pontoon under the fuselage, and two smaller pontoons under each wing. The fuselage and wings were painted in a green-and-brown camouflage pattern, and its underside was the color of murky water. There was a saw-shaped mark painted on the fin.

The plane was floating on the lake, its engine shut off and the propeller still. Mateo, Lillia, and Treize glimpsed the cockpit (where the windshield was open) and the head of the pilot inside. The pilot also noticed them and followed their floatplane with his eyes.

<That's a fighter craft from the local military. I can see the saw crest,> Mateo explained. His floatplane slowly turned to the left.

<The local military?> Lillia wondered. Treize was the one to answer.

<He's talking about the Tolcasia Self-Defense Force. Confederation member states have their own self-defense forces, even if they're very small.>

<I see. But they even have a fighter plane,> Lillia replied. Mateo chuckled.

<Ha ha ha. They sure do. But only nine of them. If the man's stranded, we should help him. Pilots and planes are hard to come by.>

<All right.>

<...But something's strange. Air Force planes should all be equipped with the latest emergency radio beacons.>

<What are those?> asked Treize.

<It's a device that kicks in during emergencies. The signal's on an exclusive frequency, and when you activate it someone around the lake should get the notice and contact you. The lake's so big that people get stranded all the time.>

<Ships that go into the open sea have those signals, correct? Weren't they developed very recently?>

<They were. Incidentally, we don't have one on this plane here. But a military plane should have one. And there should be a rescue team on the way as soon as he activates the signal...>

<Maybe he's just taking a break? I mean, the weather's so nice, maybe he's doing some fishing,> Lillia suggested.

<Ha ha. You might be right. You can catch some massive catfish and sturgeon around here,> Mateo replied, <but we should still take a look.>

The plane flew just above the water's surface, and soon Mateo warned Lillia and Treize that he would touch down. The plane began to leave a wake in the water again. It slowed and quieted. Like a boat, the floatplane glided on the lake and headed for the fighter craft ahead.

Mateo shut off the engine at just the right moment. When he hit the switch, the propeller stopped instantly. His plane stopped about 10 meters next to the fighter craft, with both planes' noses pointing in opposite directions.

"Wow. That was perfect," Treize remarked. On the lake, things were silent and still.

<One moment, you two,> Mateo said, and pulled the transmission cable. Then he undid his belt and climbed on top of his seat.

"Hello there!" he said loudly with a smile.

There was one pilot in the fighter plane. Sitting in his seat, he looked back and lightly raised his right hand. He was a young man in an aviator jacket, probably in his early twenties. He wore an aviator hat with the goggles pulled over his forehead.

"Having some mechanical trouble? Or did you run out of fuel? My apologies if you were taking a break, but this is part of my job."

The lake stretched on endlessly for miles, the horizon never broken by land. There wasn't a gust of wind and the sun was high up in the sky. The light—and Mateo's gaze—was on the fighter craft.

But there was no answer. A hint of anxiety flitted past the pilot's face. He was intentionally avoiding Mateo's gaze, staring at his control panel and at his own feet.

"Hello?" Mateo repeated himself.

"I-i-it's all right!" the pilot finally replied. He was clearly very agitated.

"Are you sure? If you're out of fuel, just say so. We've still got plenty, and I have a hand pump just for situations like this."

Yet again, the young pilot was silent.

Lillia turned and gave Treize a questioning look.

"Who knows?" Treize replied, meeting Lillia's eyes.

"Are you sure—"

"I said, I'm all right!"

The young pilot's answer was once again off-kilter. He was staring at his own hands as he sat in the cockpit, not in the mood for any conversation.

"Er...well, did I make a mistake? Is this some secret training mission? Then we'll just pretend we didn't see anything. Excuse us," Mateo said, noticing something was wrong. But the pilot again said nothing.

"Maybe we should just leave him?" Lillia asked.

"Hm..." Mateo took a moment to think, and met Lillia's and Treize's eyes. "That's true, but what if he really does need help? He's a young man. Maybe he's too proud to say that he ran out of fuel."

"Maybe."

“I just can’t leave him here like this. As a fellow pilot, you see?” Mateo said, and got out of the cockpit. Climbing down the steps, he went down onto the pontoons.

Then, he called out to the fighter craft.

“Are you sure you’re all right there, young man? If you’re having problems, don’t hesitate to tell me! I could contact the Air Force base if you’d like! I could tell them where to find you.”

The young pilot swore in response.

“Fuck off!”

At the same time, he got up from his seat and held out his arms at Mateo. A second later, the revolver in his hands roared.

There were three gunshots. One bullet hit the metal pontoon and ricocheted away.

“Huh?”

With a short moan, Mateo held his left hand to his chest and fell face-first into the water. There was a loud splash.

Mateo floated to the surface as Lillia and Treize watched in horror.

“Die, dammit!”

The man swore again, and fired. Mateo’s head jerked upwards. The bullet made a hole in his hat, and blood spurted up from the hole. His aviator hat was dyed red in seconds. The water around Mateo also turned red. Bullets continued to punctuate the air, creating pillars of water.

“Die, bastard! DIE!”

Click. Click. Click.

The pilot fired away on his revolver, which eventually spewed nothing. The empty magazine clicked and turned again and again.

“H-HEY! Hey, you!” Lillia cried. The pilot looked up in shock and stopped. And with the revolver still in his hands, he finally turned to Lillia and Treize.

“What—”

Lillia had to stop mid-sentence. Treize clicked his tongue.

When the pilot turned, his face came into view; he was clearly out of his mind. There was a smile on his lips but his eyes were petrified with fear.

“Hee hee! Eeheehee!”

His shoulder twitched as though in spasms, and he laughed.

“Hee hee hee! So that’s what murder feels like! Nothing to it! Hee hee!” He said to no one in particular.

Lillia glared and ground her teeth. When she glanced down, she could see Mateo floating before her. He was spread-eagle on the red water, not even twitching.

“Heh. If you were onboard, you would have died too...” the pilot muttered, sliding out the magazine and disposing of the shells. The shells slid down the side of the fuselage and fell into the lake. With his left hand, the pilot took out more rounds from his seat. He began to load them into his six-round magazine, one after the other.

Treize saw him, and looked at his own belt pack. He opened the zipper.

“Lillia.”

“Ah!” Lillia flinched. “What?!” she spat angrily.

“When I give you the signal, lower your head as much as you can. And stay in your seat.”

“Huh? What’re you thinking?”

“I’m going to jump over you. Please.”

Before Lillia could respond, Treize pulled on the metal lever on his seat belt. He was instantly released. Then, he pulled off his gloves as fast as he could.

“Heh heh.” The pilot giggled, loading the fifth round. He then grabbed the sixth and pushed it into the magazine. “DIE!”

But the moment he looked up at the floatplane to take aim,

“I’m gonna have to decline!” Treize replied. He stood from his seat at the very back and held out his arms, just like the young pilot had done earlier. In his hands was a mid-sized automatic handgun, the kind used by police officers and detectives.

Treize pulled the trigger.

Bang.

“Huh?”

A lead shell casing sparkled as it flew over the Lillia’s head. She watched in shock.



“Gah!”

The pilot screamed. He was hit in the right shoulder. Flinching wildly as though having been burned, he dropped his revolver. It bounced off the fuselage of his plane, then hit the water and sank.

“Now!”

Lillia immediately ducked. Her hat hit the control panel.

“Ow...”

Treize leapt over her and climbed into what was until not too long ago Mateo’s seat. He armed the safety on his gun and jammed it back into his belt pack.

“Let’s get out of here!” he cried, starting the engine. The plane roared briefly as the engine and the propeller came to life. They were quickly enveloped by noise once more.

The floatplane began to move, gliding across the surface of the lake. Mateo’s body and the fighter craft grew distant.

“_____!”

It was impossible to hear over the noise, but the pilot pressed down on his arm and shouted something, his face twisted.

Lillia stared back at him with a look both pitiful and outraged. Treize pushed the control stick to the right. The pilot and his plane disappeared from Lillia’s sight, and because she was held in place by the belts she could not even turn to look at them.

At the same time, Treize pulled the throttle lever all the way. The wind and the water stirred up in the floatplane’s wake crashed over the pilot.

“Shit!”

By the time the pilot had wiped his face with his bloody hand and followed the wake left behind the floatplane, it was already soaring through the air.

<Lillia! Can you hear me?!>

<I can! Don’t yell into the microphone!> Lillia shouted back. The floatplane was climbing rapidly with Treize in control.

<All right. You sound okay, but you didn’t get hit or anything, right?>

<I’m fine. Anyway, gimme the controls! I’ll take over!>

<Not right now.>

<Why not?!>

<Because you’re not calm enough to fly, Lillia.>

<Obviously! That bastard shot Mr. Mateo! He...he might even have killed him!>

For a while, Treize was silent. He reset the controls to return to level position, then held the control stick in place with his knees while he adjusted his seat belt. He then put his right hand back on the control stick and used his left hand to adjust the throttle, lowering the engine’s RPM. The noise abated slightly.

<Lillia. Mr. Mateo’s gone. He was shot in the head.>

<I know that! Urgh, who *was* that guy?!> Lillia said quickly. Treize gave a deliberate pause before saying,

<I don't know.>

Lillia seemed to be calmer. <Ugh...what is this? What do we do now? What do you want to do?>

<We have to get away. I want to get out of here. If this was a fighter craft, I'd at least want to leave a couple of holes in that plane...>

With that, Treize changed directions. They were headed south. Now the sun was to their right.

<Where are we going? Do you know where we are?>

<South. I'm taking us to the lakeshore. I don't know where we are, but we can't be far from land. And if we fly east along the shore, we'll definitely make it back to Lartika.>

<I see. ...And what about that man?> Lillia raised her voice again.

<We'll think about that after we get back to the city. Reaching Lartika is our priority.>

<What if he comes after us?>

<He was shot in the arm. He probably won't be able to fly his plane.>

<I see. That's fine, then. Wait, no. Why do you have a gun?>

"Because Mother forced me to bring it," Treize replied without pressing the talk button. Then, <For protection. Valleys in Ikstova are full of bears, wolves, and bearded mountain men.>

<It's illegal to carry around a handgun without registering it or getting official permission around here. Mom said so. Apparently they're cracking down so hard these days that you'll get arrested if you have a gun but not a military ID.>

<I know the Confederation's laws. And I know that the Capital District's regulations are the strictest.>

<Yeah. *And* you're a minor. What if you get caught?>

<It's fine.>

<Why?>

"Because anyone guarding royalty is allowed to carry a firearm. And that applies to me, too," Treize replied without pressing the talk button.

<Why, Treize?> Lillia repeated herself.

<Because they'll never catch me.>

<That's not an answer. Even if they don't catch you—>

Suddenly, Lillia stopped. Then,

<Treize! Above us!>

Treize looked up. The upper wing was right in front of the cockpit, making it harder to see. Treize gently pushed the control stick to tilt the plane forward.

<Ah... I see it,> he finally replied. Aeroplanes were in the distance ahead of them. Two of the same model. From the floatplane they seemed to be the size of peas, but they were the same model as the one that they had seen on the lake.

<His friends?> Lillia wondered anxiously.

<Probably.>

The fighter crafts were flying almost directly in the direction of Lillia and Treize's plane. But they were hundreds of meters overhead.

<Maybe the pilot radioed them.>

<What if they catch us?>

<If nothing else, we're in what's closest to their blind spot,> Treize said, and slowly pulled the control stick to make the plane level. They were 30 meters above the water. The pontoons licked the lake's surface.

The distance between them and the fighter crafts slowly closed. When Lillia and Treize looked up, they could even see the details of the fighters' construction. The two planes were flying side-by-side against the clear blue sky.

<Please don't see us...> Treize whispered, even though there was no way for anyone to overhear communication done over solid wires.

<What if they notice?>

<My gun?>

<No, us.>

<That depends on who those people are...but if they're anything like that freak we just saw, we're in a lot of trouble.>

<But they're part of Tolcacia's military, right? They're soldiers, just like Mom. Why would people who're supposed to defend the country do something so horrible?>

<Lillia. A villain is someone who does bad things, whatever their social status and whatever their uniform. We saw what that man did, and it was something only a villain would do.>

Lillia said nothing. Their conversation ended there.

The two fighter planes passed over the floatplane skimming the lake.

Lillia turned her head as far as she could and watched until the two planes disappeared from sight.

<Phew...they're gone.>

<All right. Oh, I see the shore. We must've been pretty far out.>

At Treize's prompting, Lillia looked ahead. The horizon had shifted from blue to green—they were at the southern shore.

<What should we do?>

<We'll land and go ashore. I'd love to fly to Lartika, but we're done for if they shoot us down in midair. Cruising in the air is going to be dangerous. Also, I want to find out where we are. I hope someone lives around here,> Treize said, and descended again. When the forest on the shore grew clearer, Lillia turned again to check if the planes weren't coming after them.

<We're touching down.>

Treize lowered the plane onto the water. Just like with Mateo earlier, there was little impact as the floatplane hit the surface and glided across the lake.

On the shore was a short strip of sand about 5 meters long. Beyond it was an eroded meter-high plateau. Above that was a deep, dense forest. There were no houses or people to be seen in any direction—only an endless wall of green.

Treize kept an eye out on the forest to his left as he maneuvered the plane as close to the shore as he could. Even after he shut off the engine, inertia propelled the plane forward for a short time. The pontoons on the left side of the plane slowly hit the sand.

“Please don't crash...”

Treize's prayer was answered. Thankfully, the plane came to a gentle stop without the wingtips hitting the trees.

Treize quickly climbed off the plane. Lillia soon followed.

"We can't lose Mr. Mateo's plane," Treize said, securing the plane to a tree with a rope he found onboard. As he worked, Lillia kept an eye out on the sky for enemies.

"Hold this for a second."

Treize pulled out a cloth bag from under a seat and tossed it to Lillia. It was about 30 centimeters wide and long, and was filled with things like emergency rations and survival gear. There was a second bag, but they left it on the plane just in case.

Lillia and Treize made their way into the woods. Fallen moss-covered trees were everywhere. They took shelter under a particularly large tree about 20 meters from shore.

They leaned against the trunk and sat on the roots that protruded above. The wet grass underfoot dampened the hems of their flight suits.

"Phew..." Treize sighed, and began to take off his aviator jacket.

"What the heck..." Lillia muttered next to him, trembling in outrage.

"Whoa."

Treize caught a glimpse of her face and leaned away.

"Man, what the heck?! What was *wrong* with that man?! How could he shoot someone who wanted to help him?!" Lillia cried, still in her jacket and with beads of sweat on her forehead.

"Calm down, Lillia. We're not going to let him get away with it."

"You got that right!" Lillia replied, shooting Treize a glare. He met her gaze and suggested that she take off her jacket. Lillia pulled off the thick aviator jacket, rolled it up, and hugged it to her stomach.

"What do we do?" she asked.

"I don't know. It doesn't look like anyone lives around here."

"I can see that."

"So obviously, we'll fly back to Lartika on the plane. But we can't just cruise over."

"I know that too. You already said all that."

"Which is why I think we might as well take a nap here or something and wait for nightfall."

"Why?"

"Because when it gets dark, the surface of the lake won't be easy to see. At the same time, the sky will be easier to see because of dusk. We'll fly low along the shore to Lartika or Bren. Since this isn't Tolcasia, we might as well go to Bren. We'll contact the police or the Roxchean military there, and make sure that guy faces justice."

"All right. We'll do that. I'm never going to let him get away with what he did...never." Lillia mumbled, emphatically repeating herself.

Treize watched Lillia before eventually mumbling, "I guess it'll work out." With the hat still on his head, he leaned back against the tree and looked up. The sky shone between the foliage.

Suddenly, a shadow flitted past.

"Damn it!"

Treize quickly pushed Lillia to the ground.

"Eek!" Lillia fell with a soft scream. Treize covered her body with his.

At the same time, the roar of an engine filled the sky. The sound approached from the lake and passed overhead.

“What’s going on?” Lillia asked, still on the ground.

“Keep your head down! It’s them! Next time they pass, they’re going to shoot at us!” Treize cried, pressing Lillia to the ground.

Soon, they heard the sound of gunfire. Then the sound of metal whipping through the air, and something breaking.

Grass was shredded all around them; dirt popped into the air; tree bark was carved out, their white insides exposed. The three-second storm ended without warning, and an engine seemed to roar past overhead.

Soon, the noise disappeared into the distance. Lillia, frozen on the ground for 10 more seconds, finally spoke.

“Is it gone...?”

There was no answer. She pushed away the boy on top of her by his shoulders.

“Hey. You’re heavy.”

She could finally move her head. Lillia looked up.

She saw Treize’s face. He had a look on his face like he had just swallowed mustard thinking it was marmalade, his eyes shut and his teeth gritted.

“Treize! Did they get you?”

“No...” Treize quickly replied. And he opened his teary eyes.

“Then move.”

Lillia pushed Treize aside with both arms and sat up. Something fell from atop his head.

“Huh?”

It was a tree branch, about 30 centimeters thick and 1 meter long. The end of the branch was covered with more branches and leaves. It must have been carved off the trunk in the storm of bullets.

“It hit my head...” Treize muttered, pushing his fingers under his hat and pressing them onto his head. He curled up and groaned. “That hurt...”

“Oh...oh no...”

Protected from the impact by Treize, Lillia could do nothing but watch for a while.

“Hey...” She hesitated. “W-we got attacked by a fighter plane! We got off easy, you know!”

That was all the encouragement she could come up with.

“I have to press on my head so it won’t leave a bump. Give me a bit...” Treize said, holding his palms against his head.

Unable to help, Lillia quietly stood. The hapless grove had been assaulted by gunfire, leaving the trees littered with bullet holes and exposing their insides. Leaves fell from above on occasion.

“Huh? Oh no!” Lillia cried.

Treize asked her what was wrong.

“The plane...”

“So they got it after all...” Treize grumbled, getting to his feet with his hands still on his head.

He walked up to Lillia, who stood stock still at the lakeshore, and followed her gaze.

About 20 meters ahead, between the trees, they could see the decimated remains of the floatplane. The fin was snapped in two and the seats they had been sitting in until not too long ago were riddled with holes. The fuselage was leaning heavily to the right, likely because the pontoon support was broken. The left wing, which pointed at the sky, was also broken in the middle.

Soon, the smell of fuel from the plane drifted on the lake breeze and into the woods. Lillia finally broke her silence.

“Mr. Mateo’s plane...”

“Mr. Mateo is dead. And so is his plane,” Treize said.

With the hand that was holding down his head, he took off his aviator hat. He placed it over his chest and observed a moment of silence.

“Ohh...what do we do now?” Lillia wondered.

Treize opened his eyes and replied, rubbing his head, “Hm. It’s a good thing it was my head.”

“What?” Lillia asked, confused.

“I’m glad the branch fell on my head and not my legs. Then you would have had to carry me.”

“What the heck. Does that mean—”

Treize nodded.

“We’re walking.”

Chapter 4: The Guiding One

Evening approached. The tilting sun began to lose light and the sky turned a darker shade of blue. In the dense forest, the sunlight didn't even reach the ground—it was even darker there than it was outside.

The grass was wet and thick roots wound everywhere, making it difficult to hike through.

“How'd we end up like this?”

“Seriously.”

Lillia and Treize were walking through the woods.

Exhausted from their long walk in the heat, they had taken off the tops of their flight suits and had tied them around their waists. Lillia had rolled up the sleeves of her blouse and loosened the top button, and was carrying the two cloth bags from the floatplane on her back.

Treize was down to his white T-shirt, with his belt pack over his flight suit. His gun was still in the belt pack in front of him. He had tied together their two leather aviator jackets into a makeshift backpack, loaded it with their aviator hats and gloves, and slung it around his shoulders.

“It's hard to walk through the forest. It's steaming hot out here, and there's all these bugs...” Lillia complained endlessly.

“Yeah,” Treize agreed calmly as he followed from about 3 meters behind.

They had walked for over an hour since their plane was wrecked. With the lake on their left, they had been heading east toward the city. It would have been much easier if they could walk along the lakeshore, but that would provide them with no cover if the fighter crafts spotted them. So they were forced to maintain a certain distance from the lake as they traversed the woods.

Eventually, Treize glanced at his watch. “Let's take a break.”

“Why? I'm still good to go.”

“It's important to rest regularly. After all, we don't know how much more we'll have to walk.”

Treize picked out a tree, and once he was sure there were no insects crawling on it, he sat down on one of its roots. With the jackets still on his back he leaned against the trunk to rest. Lillia waded through the grass and sat by a tree across from Treize and stretched her legs.

She then took out a metal cylinder about 20 centimeters long and 10 centimeters wide from one of her bags. It was a hefty water bottle.

“This thing's weighing me down,” she grumbled.

“It must've been heavy. But it's important,” Treize replied, and held out his hand. Lillia tossed him the bottle, which flew 2 meters into Treize's hand.

The lid of the bottle was a cup that covered the cylinder. Treize pulled it off and pulled out a small stopper underneath. Then, he sniffed the contents before pouring it into the cup. There was a steady stream of clean water.

“Looks pretty good. I'm impressed—Mr. Mateo must've restocked his emergency kit often.”

Lillia stopped as she pulled out her own bottle and glared. “I'm going to make sure that lunatic gets what he deserves. You better come testify at the trial, Treize!”

“As you wish, Milady.”

Treize drank slowly, as though trying just to moisten his lips. He then advised Lillia not to drink too much.

“I know that,” she replied brusquely, quenching her thirst at a steady pace.

After putting back their bottles, they took a short rest.

“You know,” Lillia said as she looked at the sky through the leaves. Treize’s eyes were closed. “That fighter craft shot Mr. Mateo’s plane on purpose, right? Why’d they do that?”

Treize opened his eyes. “Dunno. They were probably trying to make sure we couldn’t get anywhere.”

“And?”

“They wanted to make sure we couldn’t get somewhere to report them. They might have wanted to kill us, but they couldn’t see us because we were in the woods. And they didn’t land and come after us because they were either pressed for time or they were cautious because I have a gun. Anyway, you know how they say you can’t hear an aeroplane coming until it’s too late if it’s flying really low? I never knew that was true until today.”

“Now’s not the time for stupid observations.”

“And I figured out one more thing.”

“Yeah?”

“The two fighter crafts we saw earlier were the ones that attacked us. Or maybe there were three of them. I couldn’t confirm because of the gunfire, though. But what that means is that our deranged pilot’s friends are also deranged. We’ve got more people to interrogate now.”

“What do we do now?” Lillia wondered. Treize shrugged.

“What *can* we do? We have to keep walking and get somewhere. Everything else comes after. Although it might take a few days.”

“All right. I’ll walk until my feet fall off.”

“I like your spirit, but let’s rest for now,” Treize said, closing his eyes once more.

* * *

“Meriel.”

“Yes! I’m over here, Mother!”

Meriel looked up when her mother called. She was dressed in overalls, sitting in the cockpit of an aeroplane in an hangar with her head bowed as she occupied herself with work. The small, agile biplane was about 10 meters long, and was the only craft occupying the 50-meter-long hangar. The hangar’s multi-layered shutters were all closed and only the ceiling lights directly over the plane were on.

“Still working away, honey?” her mother Fiona asked, walking up to the plane.

“What is it, Mother?” Meriel asked. She poked her head out of the cockpit.

Fiona was looking up at her. “It’s almost dinnertime.”

“Already? Time flies.”

Meriel glanced at the small window further down the hangar. Beyond the frosted glass she could see the sky burning orange in the light of dusk.

“All right. ...I can’t believe I’m still not done today.”

Mumbling to herself, Meriel picked up a bag containing a small flashlight and tools and climbed out of the cockpit. Stepping on the main wing under the fuselage, she landed on the floor.

“Dinner—Dinner—I’ll just wash my hands, Mom. Wait for me?”

Meriel walked over to a sink on the wall, took off her work gloves, and lathered soap on her greasy hands. She spoke to her mother as she continued.

“I bet Treize must be getting all anxious at the hotel by now. Although I doubt he’ll bring her home after the trip.”

“Oh? What would you do if he did, honey?”

“I don’t know.”

Rinsing her hands with water, Meriel fell into thought.

“What would you do?” Fiona asked again.

Meriel turned off the tap as she replied,

“It’s so impossible I can’t even imagine it.”

As Meriel passed cruel judgement on her brother,

“We might have to camp out today...”

Treize was in a dark forest. He and Lillia had drawn as close to the lake as they could, and found that the sun had already set and the sky above was a dark blue. The full moon had just begun to rise, tinting the tree-obscured sky a pale blue.

Treize looked as far east as he could—in the direction of Lartika and Bren. But the lights that should have been visible at that time of day were nowhere to be seen.

“Tch. So we’re not gonna be staying at that hotel tonight,” Lillia complained for the hundredth time that day, leaning against a tree.

“We can stay at the hotel whenever we want later, Lillia,” Treize consoled her, “We’ll take care of the business with Mr. Mateo before we get back to the hotel.”

“Right... You’re right. That’s the important part. I’m such an idiot,” Lillia replied, lightly punching herself.

Treize watched curiously as he replied, “At least it’s summertime—we won’t have to worry about freezing to death. And we have water, since we’re by the lake. If we dig a hole in the woods and start a campfire there, they won’t be able to spot us from above.”

“That’s fine, but I’m still good to go. Let’s go a little further today!”

“Rule #1 of camping out is to find a safe place to stay while it’s still bright out.”

“That’s only when you have to set up a tent. We’re just going to cover ourselves with jackets today, so it doesn’t matter where we sleep. The moon’s bright, so we might as well keep going down the shore,” Lillia said. She had a point—once the massive moon was up, it would illuminate the world clearly.

“True. But still...”

“It’s decided. Let’s keep moving. I’m sure we’ll get an extra shot of motivation once we spot lights from a town or something. Follow me, servant!” Lillia said in mock haughtiness. Treize gave up on arguing and did as he was told.

“All right.”

“Thank you for the meal. It looks as delicious as ever.”

At a humble dinner table in the Kingdom of Iks, Meriel joined her waiting parents and looked up at a steaming-hot pot of cheese. At the same time—

“Do we keep going?”

“Yep.”

Treize and Lillia were walking endlessly along the Kurz Sea in Tolcasia. Pushing their feet into the sand under the pale blue moon, they walked along a narrow sandbank.

“Tired already?” Lillia asked as Treize stopped in front of her.

“Yeah, but I’m fine for now,” he replied.

“Then why’d you stop?”

“Huh? Oh. I just thought the lake was really beautiful,” Treize replied, turning to the water with its gentle waves and the hazy horizon in the distance.

“It’s like you’re not worried at all.”

“Maybe,” Treize said, walking again.

“Thank you for the meal. It was delicious,” Meriel said as she finished her dinner. At the same time—

“You know what they say about hungry soldiers. I’m not really being a glutton, you know.”

“Of course, Milady.”

Lillia and Treize were sitting on a pale blue beach for dinner. Their emergency supply kit had been packed with hard crackers and a small jar of strawberry jam. They dipped the crackers in the jam. Lillia ate faster than Treize.

“Breakfast and lunch were so decadent that I actually don’t mind eating like this.”

“Are you being sarcastic, Treize? Anyway, we’ll walk a bit more after this to work off the food.”

The sound of munching echoed across the tranquil lake.

“Ahh... This feels great,” Meriel said as she slid into the bathtub in her own bathroom, surrounded by fluffy foam. At the same time—

“It’s hot at night, too.”

“That’s because it’s summertime.”

Lillia and Treize were sweating profusely as they walked through the woods.

Because the beach was not wide enough for them to walk on without getting their feet wet, they were forced back into the forest. Lillia and Treize had to climb with both hands as they clambered over the thick roots on the ground. The air in the forest was humid and dense. Their faces and shirts were soaked.

“How about we set up camp somewhere around here? It’s getting late,” Treize proposed. Lillia did not deign to turn around.

“Not yet. I’d still be listening to the radio at this hour if I were home.”

“So you’re a night owl?”

“So what if I am?” Lillia replied, pressing onward.

“Good night, Mother. And Father? Please shave that beard,” Meriel said to her parents as she left the living room and headed for her own room. At the same time—

“I can’t believe we’ve come this far.”

“What?”

“It’s midnight. Just past it.”

Because of the time difference, Lillia and Treize were already experiencing midnight. The 8th day of the seventh month had begun.

With the cool night breeze against them, they resumed walking down the beach. The wind was cold against their soaked bodies, so Lillia and Treize both pulled up their flight suits again.

“Let’s rest now. We’ve come a long way,” Treize said from behind Lillia as he stopped. They had traveled over 10 kilometers since evening, resting at regular intervals.

“Damn it! How much longer do we have to walk before we see a town?!” Lillia complained for the first time that day, kicking damp sand towards the lake.

“There’s no point trying to compare our walking speed to aeroplanes. Even a hundred kilometers is nothing if you’re flying,” Treize said, sitting on the shore that happened to be about a chair’s height from the water’s surface. The moon was shining brilliantly in the sky. The white moon and the pale blue sky were so bright that none of the stars were visible.

As Lillia stood indignantly, Treize took off the watch from his left wrist and wound it.

Putting the watch back on, he said to Lillia’s back, “What do you want to do?”

She did not answer.

“My legs are tired. I think we’ll be best off just going to sleep under a tree nearby.”

She did not answer.

“We might have to walk all day tomorrow, too. And maybe even the day after. It’s important to get proper rest. We slept on a train last night; we probably didn’t feel very rested.”

She did not answer.

“Lillia? Are you sleeping on your feet?”

“As if I could!” Lillia retorted, finally turning, “Just a little more! We’ll walk until the next time we have to take a break! And if we still don’t find a town... I’ll give in, too.”

Treize shrugged in surrender and stood.

“All right. We’ll do that.”

They began to walk again under the moonlight.

It was only several minutes after they started walking again that they found the cabin.

Lillia and Treize peered out from behind a large tree trunk. The cabin stood alone in the woods under the pale blue sky.

It was a log cabin about 10 square meters wide, built next to a small stream that flowed into the lake. The foundation was firmly paved with bricks, as was the chimney. It was a sturdy

building that could last a very long time. Behind it was a small plywood building, most likely a bathroom.

A 30-meter radius around the cabin had been cleared so that the lake was visible. The clearing was a carefully-groomed yard, with small trees planted at regular intervals, brick-lined flower beds, and a small embankment as well. Firewood was stacked along the back wall.

There was no light at all coming from the four windows.

“What is this?” Lillia wondered as she and Treize watched from behind the tree.

“A mysterious cabin in the forest. No lights, no people to be seen,” Treize summarized. Lillia angrily pointed out that that was obvious.

“Then what do you want me to say, Lillia?”

“I want to know why there’s a cabin all the way in the woods like this.”

“Who knows?”

“Don’t tell me...is this a trap?”

“What?” Treize gasped.

“Maybe they’re trying to lure us into the cabin—”

“Wasn’t there a fairy tale like that? There was a witch who tried to eat a brother and sister who got lost in the woods. She got the brother to prepare a pot so she could cook the sister...or was it the other way around?”

“Exactly. That pilot and his buddies might have lured us here. As soon as we stagger in there, they’ll have us—hook, line, and sinker.”

“I would give them a pat on the back if they went all the way to the trouble of building an entire cabin, complete with a beautiful yard, just so they could capture us,” Treize said sarcastically.

“Then you mean it’s not a trap?”

“If nothing else, they probably didn’t build the cabin. But what is this place, then? It’s too fancy for a hunting outpost. It’s even got a garden.”

“Maybe the owner’s out. All right. We’ll sleep here today. Much better than camping out, right? We’ll get some actual rest,” Lillia said matter-of-factly. Treize’s eyes widened.

“Sleep? In *there*?”

Lillia met his gaze. “Yeah. It’s perfect.”

“I’m not too sure about that. What if someone’s inside?”

“I feel a bit bad, but we’ll have to wake them up. I’m sure they’ll understand once we explain,” Lillia said. Treize shook his head.

“It’s the opposite—we might end up getting the people in there involved.”

Lillia did not reply, but her eyes did not leave Treize. She seemed a little impressed. Treize grinned—

“Then we just won’t tell them anything,” Lillia said as she walked over to the cabin. Treize hurried after her.

“Sorry to intrude so late at night!” Lillia said loudly as she knocked on the door, which faced away from the lake. She waited for a moment, but the cabin was silent. The cooing of the birds in the woods seemed a little louder.

“Sorry to intrude! We’re lost! Please help us!”

She knocked again and waited. Silence.

“I don’t think anyone’s here,” Lillia said as she turned to Treize.

“Yeah. No one was here today, at least,” Treize surmised.

Lillia was quick to respond. “How do you know that? Don’t tell me you actually know who lives here.”

“No way. Look at the left wall.”

Lillia peered at the left side of the building and examined the window and wall.

“See the kitchen drainage pipe below? Look at the ground under it. It’s just as wet as the rest of the ground. And there’s no sign of water passing through, either. It means no one used any water here since it rained two days ago.”

“I see...that was clever of you,” Lillia admitted, looking impressed for a moment. She reached for the doorknob. “Sorry, whoever owns this place. We’ll be using the cabin for the night.”

The door opened with ease. It must have been unlocked.

“Excuse us.” Apologizing to the absent owner, Lillia stepped inside. Treize wiped his dirty shoes on the mat at the entrance and followed after her.

Most of the cabin interior was composed of a single room. There were several pillars, but no walls or partitions dividing the space. A small table was by the entrance, and in front of that was a kitchen with a water tank installed on the wall. There was a cooking stove with a chimney routed outside, and cabinets filled with dishes and silverware. On the right side of the door was a brick fireplace and chimney, and further inside the room was a simple wooden bed.

From the neatness of the cabin, it seemed like it was not abandoned. Everything, from the plank floors to the humble furniture, was silently bathed in moonlight as though time had stopped.

“Er...” Lillia started hesitantly. Her voice sounded particularly loud.

“No one’s here, right? Then we’ll be staying the night! Thank you!” Treize said in place of the silent Lillia, making a deliberate show of speaking loudly as he reached back and shut the door.

At the royal palace in the Kingdom of Iks, Meriel slept peacefully and comfortably in her own bed. At the same time—

“I’m only letting you sleep in the same room as me because it’s an emergency. All right?”

“Yes, Milady.”

“Good.”

Lillia and Treize were preparing to go to sleep in the cabin in the woods.

Lillia lay on the bed with her jacket over her in place of blankets. Treize sat on the left side of the bed with the blankets under him. He was also wearing his flight suit and had put a jacket over himself.

“Let’s get some sleep for now. Today was such a hectic day...”

“Good night.”

“But! We have to walk as much as we can tomorrow, too. We’ll avenge Mr. Mateo, no matter what!”

“Yeah.” With a loud yawn, Treize glanced at his watch. “The radio broadcasts in the Capital District must have ended by now.”

“I get the point, okay? Good night,” said Lillia.

Treize also bid her a good night.

There was silence. Treize quietly reached for his belt pack, which was still wrapped around his waist. He could see a glimmer of black between the open zipper.

He brushed the glint with his fingers as if to check it was there, then put his leather jacket over himself and closed his eyes with his back against the bed.

Sleep washed over him. But at that moment—

“Just to warn you!”

Lillia’s voice chased away his drowsiness.

“Hm?”

“Just to warn you, you’d better not up and leave without telling me!”

“Okay, I’ll keep watch from here. I even rigged the door,” Treize replied without opening his eyes.

There was a thread tied to the doorknob from the inside. It was tied to a precariously-balanced chair set up to fall as soon as the door opened.

“Good.”

With that, silence once again returned to the cabin.

Lillia lay asleep in bed, and Treize—sitting next to her—also slept.

They remained exactly where they were as time passed in silence.

The pale blue light seeped in through the window. Only the shadow of the frame moved, slowly brushing over Treize’s black hair and Lillia’s face.

When morning neared, the moon fell toward the west and light began to shine through the kitchen window.

And,

His shadow was far from Treize and Lillia. It moved silently over the wooden floor.

Standing without a word in the center of the room, he looked down at the sleeping duo.

For a very long time, he did not move.

Suddenly, he pulled a blade from behind his back. It was a thin black knife over 20 centimeters long.

He drew closer to Treize, knife in hand.

“Just you wait, Meriel...”

He froze.

“Just you wait, Meriel...I swear...”

Treize’s Bezelese sleep talk filled the quiet cabin.



* * *

Morning.

It was just before dawn, and the world was full of light. The light outside illuminated the cabin, bringing shapes into focus and emphasizing their presence.

The light reached Lillia's face as she slept on the bed. The sunlight highlighted her every eyelash. Her eyelids twitched.

"Hwaaa..."

She opened her eyes.

"Morning already?"

Not being a heavy sleeper like her mother, Lillia muttered as she slowly sat up. Her long hair slid down and the jacket she had over herself fell onto her lap.

"Yawn...that was a good night's sleep. Yep," she mumbled, rubbing her eyes—

"Good morning. Did you sleep well?" asked the man in the kitchen.

"Yes. Good morning," Lillia replied, turning to the kitchen. "...Huh?"

About 5 meters away stood a man. He was about 60 years old, and was tall and fit. He had short, thin black hair with patches of white, and had a genial smile on his face. He was wearing white clothes reminiscent of a doctor's coat.

"Ah..."

Still sleepy, Lillia thought for a moment.

"Excuse me, but who are you?" she finally wondered, confused.

"Me? I'm the owner of this house, Miss," the man replied.

"Oh, I see. I see." Lillia nodded.

Then,

"Huh? Oh! Ah! Er—"

Finally realizing what was happening, Lillia stammered incoherently.

"Please, not to worry. Calm down. There's nothing to panic about," the man said. Only after sighing and taking a couple of deep breaths did Lillia return to her senses.

"We're sorry for intruding! We lost our way in the woods, and—"

"Yes, I suspected as much," the man replied, taking a seat, "So please don't worry. If you're still tired, feel free to get some more sleep."

"Ah!"

That reminded Lillia. She quickly looked around, and found what she was looking for on the left side of the bed. He was sleeping peacefully in the same position as last night, leaning against the bed with his head bowed even as Lillia and the man spoke.

"Ugh..."

She glared.

"Your friend seems to be tired—let's not wake him. Let him sleep a little longer," said the man. But Lillia ignored him and, with her left foot, kicked Treize in the head.

"Gwah?!"

With a comic squawk, Treize woke up to Lillia's kick for the second morning in a row.

“What—were—you—thinking—you—were—no—help—at—all—”

Lillia raised her foot again, menacingly reprimanding him.

“Please, calm down. I think that’s enough morning exercise for now, don’t you think?”

“What’s going on here?”

For a moment after being rescued by the man, Treize was lost. He head only cleared after about 10 seconds.

“Oh...I’m sorry we barged into your house, sir,” he said quickly.

“Please, it’s not a problem. As I said to your friend, I understand the gist of things. There aren’t any other houses or towns around here, after all,” the man replied with a smile, “Why not wash up first? We can talk afterwards and introduce ourselves then. It would be a shame to send you off without knowing your names.”

Lillia and Treize did as the man suggested. They went to the bathroom outside and washed their faces with clean water from the stream, still dressed in their flight suits.

Treize wiped his face with a handkerchief as he said, “It’s like he’s a monk or something.” He glanced at the cabin several meters away.

“Anyway,” said Lillia, “it’s a good thing he’s such a nice person. Good thing, since a certain useless someone’s useless little contraption turned out to be totally useless.”

Treize ignored Lillia’s jab. “I wonder if there’s a secret passage into the cabin. I guess that’s the owner for you.”

“This is no time to be impressed. If he was a bad guy, we’d be dead by now.”

“Then I’d blame you for the rest of my life for refusing to camp out.”

“*After* you died? That’d be something to see.”

They walked back to the cabin. It was a pleasant morning, with clear sunlight and cool moist air. It was bright enough now that they could clearly see vegetable patches and flower beds, the vibrant green forest around them, and the great lake between the trees. Wisps of cotton-candy clouds floated lazily across the sky.

“What a beautiful place,” Lillia said, stopping partway and looking around in awe. Treize left her and went ahead into the cabin.

“Let me introduce myself. I am Ein Morseau.”

Inside the cabin, Lillia, Treize, and the man sat around the small round table. Because there were only two chairs around it, they had to bring in a folding chair that had been leaning against the wall. On the table were three freshly-prepared cups of steaming-hot tea.

“My name is Lillia Schultz.”

“I’m Treize. Nice to meet you.”

The man named Morseau replied, “Lillia and Treize. You both have wonderful names.”

“Er...Mr. Morseau?” Lillia said, “I’d like to apologize again. For using your house without permission.”

“Again, it’s perfectly fine. I keep the door unlocked precisely for situations like this—if anyone were to lose their way in the woods, I mean. Although I must admit that you two were the first to ever do so.”

“Thank you so much. You didn’t have to serve us tea, too,” Lillia replied apologetically.

“Please, it’s no trouble. While you’re here, why not join me for breakfast?”

“If you need any help with anything, please let us know.”

“Thank you. I will. But what do the two of you plan to do now? That’s the most important question, I think,” said Morseau. As Lillia wondered what he meant, Treize answered.

“We’d like to return to Bren first; that’s where we left our things. And we’d like to get there as quickly as we can. We have some important business to take care of. Could you tell us how to get there? And if you know of any method of transportation, please tell us.”

“Of course. Now, it seems like your urgent business has something with you two getting lost. Am I correct? What in the world happened?”

Treize was quick to reply.

“I’m afraid we can’t say. I’m very sorry, Mr. Morseau.”

Lillia shot Treize an angry glare. Treize met her gaze. So neither of them noticed the glint of chilly sadness that flashed over Morseau’s face.

“I see. That’s unfortunate. I’m sure I could help you if you’d tell me.”

“I’m very sorry, Mr. Morseau.”

Lillia suddenly turned to Treize.

“Hey. Let’s talk for a second.”

With a firm grip on Treize’s shoulder, Lillia berated him furiously under her breath in Bezelese, “I know we said we wouldn’t tell anyone, but maybe we should tell this guy. He helped us out; it’s the least we could do.”

Naturally, Morseau could hear her voice just fine. He seemed a little surprised.

“I’m sticking by what I said yesterday. I don’t want to get anyone involved,” Treize replied quickly in Bezelese. Lillia glared.

“Please, you two. Don’t argue, now. Everyone has their secrets. I may not know what your business is, but let me try and help you nevertheless. Let’s think together,” Morseau said. Lillia obediently took her hand off Treize’s shoulder.

“I can imagine what must have happened, of course,” said Morseau. “Your vehicle must have broken down.”

“Yes.” “That’s correct,” Lillia and Treize replied.

“Then allow me to lend you my car.”

“What? Where is it?” Lillia asked. The cabin’s surroundings looked exactly as they did the previous day.

“If you follow the short path to the south, you’ll reach a narrow road between the trees. That’s as far as the car can come. I always park there and walk the rest of the way to the cabin. I’ll let you use my car.”

“Thank you. Then...where do we go with the car? Where are we? How long until we reach a town?” Lillia asked in one breath.

Morseau thought for a moment. Several seconds of silence passed before he opened his mouth.

“It might take me a while to explain. Shall we talk after breakfast?”

Lillia, Treize, and Morseau divided up duties to prepare breakfast.

Treize's job was to chop firewood outside. Lillia's job was to draw water. Morseau's job was to prepare the ingredients.

When Lillia and Treize finished their work and returned to the cabin, Morseau was peeling potatoes. With a thin black knife over 20 centimeters long, he expertly peeled the potatoes and carved out the eyes.

"Let me help," said Lillia.

"I'm grateful for the offer, but I'm finished peeling now. I'll be boiling them, along with the eggs and sausages I brought this morning. You can sit back now."

Treize put firewood into the stove as Morseau instructed and lit it. Lillia had nothing to do but wait.

"Is there anything I can help you with?"

"Please, it's quite all right. This is my specialty."

Placing the thin potato slices into the pot, Morseau waited for it to boil before adding sausages and salt and pepper. Finally, he lowered the heat, and cracked the eggs into a bowl before beating them and pouring the contents into the pot. Then, he shut the lid and waited.

Soon their meal was ready. The food was served in soup dishes and placed on the table. Soft potatoes and sausages filled with herbs. And one serving of poached egg per person.

The food was steaming. Lillia swallowed.

After breakfast, they had tea again.

"Well now...where should I begin?" Morseau said first.

They were all sitting around the table. Treize and Lillia had taken off their flight suits and were dressed in the same clothes as the previous day.

"I suppose I should start by telling you where we are."

Lillia and Treize nodded. Morseau continued.

"This house is my refuge. I come here when I want to take some time to think quietly by myself. I spend about half the year in this cabin."

"What do you do for a living, Mr. Morseau? ...Oh, you don't have to answer if you don't want to," Lillia said.

"I don't mind. I help people in this country—or so I'd like to believe."

"You help people?"

"Yes. Do you know how impoverished Tolcasia is? That there are many orphans?"

Lillia and Treize solemnly nodded.

"I am planting hopes for the future in those unfortunate children. I work alongside the people of Tolcasia with the belief that our work will instill hope in the orphans."

"By any chance...do you run a facility that helps poor children find work in the Capital District?" Treize asked.

"I'm surprised you know," Morseau replied.

"Are you the Master, then? The person everyone loves and respects?" asked Lillia. Morseau put on an embarrassed smile.

"That is what people call me sometimes. But please, call me Morseau. It's a little less awkward for me that way."

Lillia and Treize exchanged glances. Lillia leaned forward. “Mr. Morseau, wasn’t a little boy sent there yesterday? We met him in Lartika...”

Morseau was surprised yet again.

“Y-yes. His name was...Carlo, correct?”

“We don’t know his name, but...”

“Hm. If I recall, he was wearing a dirty brown shirt and long black pants. He seemed to be about 10, but he said that he was 12 years old.”

“Yes, that’s him!”

“A police officer brought him to us late last evening. He was very unhappy at first, but he opened up to us as he ate dinner. He’s a good, honest boy at heart.”

“Thank goodness. And he even told you his name.”

“Yes. Although he didn’t seem to want to at first.”

“Thank goodness,” Lillia repeated, her eyes narrowing as she took another sip of tea.

“Then let me continue. We are very deep in the woods here. We’re about 80 kilometers directly from Lartika and Illuès—ah, Illuès is a village on the lake southwest of Lartika.” Said Morseau.

“No way... Eighty kilometers?” Treize repeated, astonished.

Morseau chuckled. “It’s a bit of a long walk. And incidentally, the nearest village to the west is about 40 kilometers away. They have bus services there. And Healer Village, where the facility is, is about 15 kilometers further.”

“Man...I can’t believe it.”

“This is what Tolcasia is like.”

“Then,” said Lillia, “what should we do?”

“As I said earlier, I will lend you my car. Take it to the village. Oh, can you drive a gasoline car?”

Lillia shook her head and turned to Treize. He was in the middle of sipping his tea, but he met her gaze and replied, “Yeah. I don’t have a license, though.”

“That’s all right. You won’t run into anyone on the way. Please park the car at the village hall and ask the villagers to take you to Healer Village. I’ll write a letter asking them to take you. I’ll also ask them to bring my car back here.”

“Thank you, Mr. Morseau. You’re a lifesaver.”

“Thank you. Is there another way to get to Lartika from the village? A bus, by any chance?” asked Treize.

“Well, yes. But you’ll need to make transfers, and it takes an entire day. There are only two buses per day.”

“Oh...”

“That’s a long time.”

Morseau gave them an amused look, like a parent hiding a birthday gift from a child.

“But you two are lucky. So very lucky. There’s another way to get to Lartika or Bren—very quickly, to boot.”

“What?” “Really?”

Lillia and Treize waited for him to continue.

Morseau chuckled, embarrassed. "There is an aeroplane heading from Healer Village to Lartika."

"An aeroplane?" "This isn't part of a regular service, is it?" Lillia and Treize asked.

Morseau nodded firmly. "This is practically a miracle. The flight's only operating today. You see, we're having a charity tour flight for the children at the facility—children who would never otherwise have the chance to fly. Anonymous donors from the Capital District have provided us with funding to show their love for Tolcasia. They want to give these underprivileged children a chance to see nature from high up in the air."

"Wow...that's so kind of them." "Aren't you going to board as well, Mr. Morseau?" said Lilia and Treize, respectively.

"Naturally, I was offered several times. But if I go aboard, that means one fewer child will get to enjoy the flight. So I declined. I'm actually in hiding here today because I thought it might be difficult to stay on the ground, what with all the villagers telling me to go," Morseau replied.

"So is it really all right for us to board?"

"I'm sure it will be. I don't know much about aeroplanes, but they supposedly rented one that can fit many people. It's going to be departing from the lake."

"So it must be a large seaplane," Treize said.

"A seaplane! Yes, that was the word I was looking for!" Morseau exclaimed.

"But if there's no room..."

"I was told that the plane would take on more passengers at the harbor in Illuès. So some seats will be empty until then. The departure time will be after lunch—you'll have plenty of time to get there."

"I see...so we can get back to Bren today if we take the plane."

"There are many ships that go between Illuès and Bren, so I'm quite certain you'll get there."

"But could we afford a seaplane ride?" Lillia wondered anxiously.

"Not to worry. Like I said, this is a charity flight. I'll write a letter saying that you two are volunteers. I would be lying, but this is an emergency, yes? I'm sure things will be all right so long as you explain later."

"Then..."

"Not to worry. Enjoy the flight with the children. And get your business settled when you reach Bren. I will be praying for your success from here."

Lillia, Treize, and Morseau were standing at the door of the cabin. The morning sun had risen and was shining on them all.

Treize was holding a paper bag from Morseau that contained the flight suits and jackets he and Lillia had been wearing. Lillia had bottles of water—newly re-filled—slung over her back.

"Take care, then," said Morseau, "Come to think of it, this is the first time I've ever seen people off from this house. It's strange, but also quite an interesting experience."

"Thank you for everything, Mr. Morseau," Lillia said.

Morseau smiled and spread his arms. Lillia walked into his embrace. He hugged her gently.

“Be careful. And Treize? Please drive safely.”

“Of course. Thank you, Mr. Morseau. We’ll do exactly as you said once we reach the village.”

“We’ll come and thank you again once everything settles down,” said Lillia.

“Please. Let’s meet at the facility next time,” Morseau said, and waved. Treize coaxed Lillia forward. Lillia bowed one last time. Treize did the same.

“Take heart. I know the two of you will be just fine,” Morseau finally said.

With the cabin behind them, Lillia and Treize set off for the village. Just before they stepped into the woods, they turned and waved. Morseau waved back.

* * *

There was a narrow road in the forest, just wide enough for a single car to pass though.

The road stretched straight from east to west; the dirt underneath was trodden solid, and green weeds poked out of the earth.

A small, slightly old two-seater car with a covered top was traveling west along the road.

Treize sat in the driver’s seat on the left, holding the thin steering wheel. Lillia sat next to him.

Whenever they hit a muddy stretch of the road, the car shook. Treize changed gears when necessary and slowed down, carefully driving as fast as he could.

They had said nothing since they stepped into the car, silently watching the scenery.

About 20 kilometers later,

“We’re halfway there,” Treize muttered, “It’s definitely faster than walking,” he said, gauging Lillia’s reaction. But she said nothing.

“You’re really quiet today, Lillia. You can go to sleep if you’d like.”

“I’m not sleepy,” Lillia finally said, looking straight ahead.

“Of course, Milady.”

“We met a lot of people in this country,” she said suddenly and firmly. Treize was surprised.

“Huh? ...Right. And?”

“The captain, Carlo, and Mr. Mateo. They were all such nice, kind people.”

“Yeah...”

“But that pilot was the worst of the worst. And his friends, too. Then we met Mr. Morseau, who turned out to be the complete opposite.”

“Yeah.”

“Then who are we going to meet next? Good people? Or bad?” Lillia wondered, looking Treize in the eye.

“Who knows?” he replied immediately.

<This is Treefrog 1. Come in, Thunderstorm. This is an emergency.>

<This is Thunderstorm. Treefrog 1, respond.>

<Target's car sighted heading for the village. But the target is not in the car. I repeat. The target is not in the car.>

<Roger that. Describe the occupant.>

<Now passing—they've passed by. Two occupants, both in their mid-to-late teens. A boy and a girl. They are not on the list. The target does not seem to be in the car. Shall I have Treefrog 2 stop the car?>

<Not without the target inside. Treefrog 2, respond.>

<This is Treefrog 2. Reception clear. Thunderstorm, respond.>

<So you were listening. The car is moving. Photograph the car, just in case. I repeat. Photograph the car.>

<Copy that.>

“Right...we don't know,” Lillia said, looking forward again.

At that moment, their faces were caught on film.

A man dressed in camouflage gear was in the woods. He had held up a camera equipped with a rifle-like stock and a long telephoto lens and quickly pressed the shutter.

Next to the man with the camera was another man, who was also dressed in camouflage gear and aiming a small submachine gun directly at the car. Behind him was yet another man, holding a gun in the opposite direction as they stood nigh-invisible in the woods. The men's submachine guns were the very same model that Treize had refused on the train.

“They're gone. Photographs?”

“They're good. It was definitely a boy and a girl.”

“Yes. I saw. But who are they? No one should have gone to that cabin after the target.”

“They don't look like Tolcasians to me, sir.”

“I agree. Those two just might be with the ‘Monstrous One’.”

Chapter 5: Reunion

“You met the Master? That’s wonderful!”

Lillia and Treize arrived at a tiny village consisting of a cluster of 20 houses and a single road.

Just as Morseau instructed, they had gone to the village hall on the outskirts of the community. A middle-aged woman heard the car and came outside, and seemed to be shocked to see the two. But once she read Morseau’s letter, all her doubts were cleared.

“This is delightful. I can’t believe I get a chance to help out the Master!” she said, beaming, “Come inside and sit for a while. I’ll have my husband get his truck.”

Then she quickly ran towards the houses.

As they watched her depart, Treize commented, “It looks like Mr. Morseau gets a lot of respect.”

“Of course he does,” Lillia replied, holding her head high.

“Why are *you* acting so proud?”

Soon, a middle-aged man arrived with an empty truck. He promised Lillia and Treize that he would take them to Healer Village. Treize handed Morseau’s car keys to the woman.

With Treize and Lillia in the passenger seats, the truck departed amidst the well-wishes of the villagers.

They traveled down a gravel road that was about twice the width of the forest path. The truck raced to the village, leaving a trail of dust in its wake.

Lillia clung to the leather handle on the side of the door for dear life, frozen amidst the roar of the engine and the speeding surroundings.

“Please, slow down!” Treize pleaded with the driver. The paper bag at his feet danced.

“Heh. We’ll be just fine. My job’s to get you two to Healer Village as fast as possible for the Master.”

“That’s great and all, but what if something leaps out of the woods or something?”

“It’s all right. The local animals don’t get much bigger than deer—when one pops out, the rest usually just follow without even thinking.”

“So what if a deer—or a herd of deer—leap into the road?” asked Treize.

The man met his gaze, staring for a long time.

“Please keep your eyes on the road.”

“If a deer runs into the road, that’s when I run it down like *BAM!* What d’you think the grille guard is for?” the man replied, nodding at the front of the truck.

“I...see.”

“If I hit the brakes and slow down, the deer might end up jumping *inside* the truck. Then it’ll go wild before it dies, which is bad for us. But if I hit it properly, we could be having venison tonight.”

“I understand. But please slow down.”

“All right.”

The man lifted his foot slightly from the gas pedal. The truck was finally moving at a legal speed again.

“Man...I thought we were done for,” Lillia mumbled, letting go of the handle, “Say, Mister? Is Mr. Mo- I mean, the Master really such a great person?”

“Course he is!” the man replied, stepping harder. The truck accelerated violently.

“Please! The gas pedal!” Treize said desperately.

“Oh, sorry. ...Of course he’s a great man. I take it the two of you don’t know much about the Master?”

“We don’t know anything about him. He didn’t exactly give us a biography, and we couldn’t really pry.”

“Right. He’s a humble man, too.”

“Could you tell us who the Master is?” Lillia asked, eyes on the driver’s seat.

“Of course. It’s been about 30 years since he came to Tolcasia. We were still at war with Sou Be-II. Was it during the Lestki Island incident, or earlier...? It was a long time ago, at any rate.”

“Where did he come from?” asked Lillia.

The man shrugged. “Who knows? The Master didn’t seem too keen on talking about his past. So we decided not to pry. He suddenly appeared in Tolcasia out of nowhere. Rented an empty house in Healer Village and started a facility to help poor children become independent. He looked after them, fed them, taught them, and found work for them—all for free. At first, everyone was suspicious. What kind of foreigner would just do all this for no profit, everyone wondered.”

“But what about now?”

“Well, time passed and everyone was moved by how the Master did all he could for the children. More and more people stepped up to volunteer or support him. So our country’s poor children lived at the facility, then became independent and moved away. I’ve even heard that some children who found work at the Capital District started sending donations to the facility once they were adults.”

“That’s so sweet.”

“It’s certainly heartwarming. Nowadays, no one would badmouth the Master—at least, no one from Tolcasia. We’re such a backwater member state that the rest of the Confederation knows almost nothing about the Master, though. —No offense to you Capital District folks.”

“None taken.”

“Please don’t worry about us.”

“Anyway, that’s how the facility sends a few kids to the Capital District every year. But a lot of kids forget the Master’s kindness and break off contact with the facility. Ungrateful lot,” said the man. Lillia agreed.

“Shouldn’t they at least write back? Everyone would be so happy to hear from them.”

“Darn right. But the Master always says, no news is good news. He personally sees off the children who leave. He’s always hoping the children will have a bright future.”

“That’s wonderful. I’ll be sure to tell everyone I know once we get back to the Capital District.”

“I’m happy to hear that.”

“And I’ll tell everyone about the nice man who took us to Healer Village.”

“I’m happy to hear that, too.”

“We met someone really awful recently. But it turned out that everyone we met after that was really kind. It feels good knowing that the world’s not full of bad guys after all.”

“I’m very happy to hear that.”

The truck continued down the gravel road.

“We’re almost there.”

No sooner had he spoken than the surface of the Kurz Sea came into view between the trees to their right. The lake shone brilliantly under the blue sky and the midday sun.

“Thank you so much, Mister.”

“Thank you.”

Lillia and Treize stepped off the truck.

“Don’t mention it. I’m honored I could do something for the Master. Have a good flight, you two,” the man replied, starting the truck. Soon, he gave a honk and drove back down the gravel road.

“Finally.”

“We’re finally here.”

Treize and Lillia turned.

They stood at the edge of the woods. About 200 meters ahead they could see Healer Village and the lake.

The village began at the lakeshore, and was crowded with roads and houses. There was a building with a spire in the distance past the red brick roofs.

Many docks were set up on the lake to the right, acting as the village’s harbor. There were several boats moored there.

And before the docks was a large seaplane. It had a shining metal fuselage with a ship-like underside. Its large, wide wings were mounted above, with four engines and propellers. The seaplane was over 20 meters long, and the two fins were over 4 meters above the water’s surface. The boat in front of the plane looked tiny in comparison.

Several tents had been erected by the warehouse at the harbor. A crowd was gathered there.

Lillia and Treize headed for the tents. Because there was no road to the harbor, they had to diagonally cut across the plaza, which was still covered with dirt and had not been cleared of tree stumps.

“That’s a big seaplane. Have you ever flown on something like that?” asked Lillia.

Treize shook his head. “Of course not. That one looks like an older passenger craft. I heard models like that were cut from service recently because aeroplanes are getting better and airstrips are being repaired.”

“You know a lot, don’t you?”

“I’d love to try flying something that big one day.”

“Not me. I’ll take the smaller, faster ones any day.”

The harbor area was occupied with a large luncheon. Countless dishes were lined up on the tables, and the people chattered like they were at a festival as they enjoyed their meals. There were many children there as well. Over 20 of them sat on the concrete ground in front of a warehouse as they ate.

“Excuse me. Could we ask a question?” Treize asked a young woman sitting next to the children. Making sure that she was an employee at the facility, he handed her Morseau’s letter.

“Please, I’m not worthy to read the Master’s letter!” she said, passing the letter to an older woman in an apron who was carrying dishes.

The older woman read the letter and nodded. “I understand. We’ll do as the Master asks.”

The woman called over a man in a suit and explained the situation to him. The man introduced himself as being from the Capital District, and as the one who arranged for the seaplane. He promised to allow Lillia and Treize to board.

Lillia and Treize politely expressed their gratitude.

“Have you eaten yet? The whole village is eating together today. Join us for lunch,” the older woman suggested with a smile.

Lillia and Treize accepted her offer with gusto. They stuffed themselves with boiled meat and peas from massive pots and plates, tiny fried shrimp, fruit tarts, colorful breads, and apple juice with endless refills.

In the middle of their meal, Treize whispered to Lillia, “This Master’s getting us everywhere and everything.”

“We’d be goners if not for him. ...Imagine how much fun we’d be having by now if we’d never met that crazy pilot,” Lillia replied.

It was after the meal, when they sat on the concrete floor to rest, that someone spotted them.

“Huh? It’s big bro and big sis! What are you doing here?”

A boy walking by with an apple in hand suddenly spoke up. He was about 10 years old, and wore a brown shirt and long black pants. He was the ‘guide’ they had hired at Lartika.

“Hm? Oh, Carlo!” Lillia cried.

Treize also greeted the boy. “We meet again.”

Carlo sheepishly walked up to them. “How’d you know my name? ...I guess the old guy must’ve told you, huh. Damn it.”

“The old guy? Oh, you mean Mr. Morseau. Yes, we met him,” Lillia replied with a smile.

Treize added, “So you at least told him your name. Good.”

“Well...he gave me food and stuff, so yeah. But I’m stickin’ by my personal policy, big bro. Big sis.”

Lillia chuckled. “I’m fine with that. We were worried about you, Carlo. I’m so glad we met again. How’s the facility?”

Carlo looked at the air and thought. “Well...it’s not as bad as I thought. For now. They give me all my meals, too. But the police officer was annoying.”

“That’s good to hear. You clothes look a little cleaner, too.”

“What happened to you two, anyway? What are you doing out here in the countryside? Did they kick you out of that fancy hotel because you made a racket at night or something?”

“No, Carlo. We just...had a rough day. But then Mr. Morseau helped us out. Now we’re getting a ride on that seaplane so we can go back to Lartika.”

“Huh. So even rich people like you get in trouble sometimes?” Carlo replied. It was hard to tell if he was shocked, astonished, or being condescending.

Then, he suddenly raised his voice.

“Anyway, aren’t you excited? This is amazing!”

“What is?” Treize asked.

“What else? The aeroplane! They said we get to ride it! It’s even better than this lunch! I saw the plane flying here last night!” Carlo raved, holding his apple in one hand and pointing at the seaplane with the other. Lillia, who had been on aeroplane rides since she was younger than Carlo, made a complicated face.

“I...I see. It must be exciting?”

“Of course it is! Poor kids like me would never get to ride on an aeroplane, you know. I don’t believe it! It must be a miracle! If I got here a day late, I wouldn’t have gotten to ride it. We’re all so lucky.”

“Yeah,” said Treize.

After lunch, people began to take away the dishes and silverware from the table.

Lillia and Treize stood to help, but were turned away and left with nothing to do. They sat on the stairs by the warehouse and blankly stared at the scene. The sun shone brightly overhead, and a gentle breeze from the lake caressed their faces.

“I’m getting tired. I think I might fall asleep on the plane...”

“Sure.”

“We went through too much yesterday and today.”

“Yeah.”

“But we’re going to avenge Mr. Mateo no matter what.”

“Yeah. Definitely.”

That was when Carlo walked up to them. “They said we’re leaving soon, so anyone who has to go to the bathroom should go now and meet in front of the plane.”

“Okay. Let’s go.”

Treize stood and held out a hand to Lillia.

She refused his hand and got to her feet with all the gravity of a soldier bound for battle.

“Let’s go. I swear, the first thing I do when we land is run straight to the police station.”

Treize lightly waved his empty hand and shrugged.

Watching Lillia quietly walk away to the plane, Carlo asked Treize, “Say, is big sis actually scared of flying or something?”

The lunch was attended by about 40 adults, 20 children, and several people with armbands labeled ‘press’, including cameramen. The reporters snapped photograph after photograph and asked the adults and children all kinds of questions with notebooks in hand.

Of the reporters, one saw the children lining up to board and turned to his group.

“All right. Let’s head out.”

“Right.”

The men returned to their vehicle near the warehouse entrance. It was a perfectly nondescript black van, difficult to distinguish from others. There was a spare tire affixed behind it, and there was a wooden crate in the back covered by a piece of cloth.

The men got in and started the van. Noticed by no one, the van left the village and merged onto a main road outside the settlement. The road was wide and paved with dirt, and

there were no other vehicles in sight. The road continued endlessly into the horizon. Utility poles stood in a line under the shoulder.

When the village was completely out of sight, the van stopped at a stretch of the road sandwiched between a field and a forest. One of the men stepped off and pulled a thin antenna out the window.

Another man, who sat in the back, operated the machine in the crate in the back. The machine was a radio. The man who had until not too long ago been wearing a ‘press’ armband held up the microphone and spoke.

“This is Treefrog 4. Come in, Thunderstorm.”

For a second, there was static. Then, a response.

<This is Thunderstorm. Treefrog 4, respond.>

“Treefrog 4 reporting. The seaplane is departing as scheduled. We confirmed two additional passengers who were not on the original list. I repeat. Two additional passengers. Requesting instruction.”

<The passengers. A boy and a girl in their mid-to-late teens?>

“Yes. How did you know?”

<Treefrog 1 and 2 witnessed them heading west by car from the target’s house. Their presence on the plane changes nothing. Confirm takeoff and proceed as planned.>

<Understood. We will return to the harbor to confirm takeoff.>

“We have contact from Treefrog 4. The boy and the girl are boarding the seaplane. Departure as scheduled.”

“Then we’re clear. We won’t even need to step in.”

“But we should report to ‘Aristocrat’ just in case.”

“Huh? It’s just a detail.”

“He *wants* detailed reports. Nothing is to be left out. He’s a meticulous man. Connect me.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Ahem. Thanks to the kindness of anonymous donors from the Capital District—”

When the village elder’s lengthy speech finally came to an end, the children lined up to board the plane.

They were five or six years old at the youngest, and the older ones were about 12. In total, there were 23 children, about 10 of them girls. They were all wearing similar shirts and shorts.

“They’re all from the facility. And we all had basically the same lives. I made friends with a few of them yesterday, but some of them I’ve never talked to,” said Carlo.

“You two,” said the older woman from earlier, going up to Lillia and Treize, “I know the children might be a handful, but I hope you have a good trip. I’ll tell the Master that we sent you off.”

Lillia thanked her again. Treize bowed.

Carlo stood at the back of the line. Lillia and Treize lined up after him. A man in his forties, who wore a button-up shirt and tie like a commercial aeroplane pilot, counted the passengers. 25 people, up to Treize at the very end.

“So you two are the last-minute passengers? Since you’re the oldest of the bunch, I’d like you to watch over the children during the flight,” said the pilot. Lillia nodded.

“Of course. But we’ll be getting off partway.”

“But please take care of them while you’re onboard. Just make sure they don’t do anything dangerous. I agreed to the flight knowing only children were going to board, but to be honest it’s a little unnerving if they’re not supervised.”

“Hm...”

“I’m counting on you,” the man said, and left the line. He went over to shake hands with the adults, and led the children at the front to the dock.

Seen off by the villagers, the facility employees, and the reporters and their cameras, the children walked in single file down the dock. The 40-meter dock was the longest in the village, and was connected to a 20-meter floating bridge made of drum canisters and plywood. The edge of the bridge was the ramp into the seaplane. The door into the plane was in the middle of the passenger cabin; the cockpit was on the right side of the fuselage, and round windows dotted the sides in perfect symmetry.

From up close, the seaplane looked even more massive. The two fins stuck proudly into the air, and the 35-meter wings covered the sky like a shade.

“Wow, it’s huge!”

“It’s so big.”

“Does this thing really fly?”

“This is so cool!”

The children chirped and chattered as they stepped onto the plane.

Lillia, Treize, and Carlo entered as well. On the right side of the plane was a very steep staircase—which was almost a ladder—that led into the cockpit higher up. On the left was a corridor leading into the freight hold and the passenger cabin.

They passed through a long, narrow, oval-shaped door and entered the cabin. A carpet ran down the middle of the cabin, with two-person seats facing one another on either side of the aisle.

Because the children who boarded earlier had taken most of the seats, Lillia, Treize, and Carlo headed for the empty seats at the very end. Behind the seats were a door leading into the bathroom and the emergency hatch on the right side.

Carlo and Lillia sat on the right sides. Treize sat alone on the left, putting the paper bag in the empty seat across from him.

Not only were the seats as good as couches, they were also large and soft and comfortable. There were patches of visible repair and some discoloration, but it was another world compared to the cramped, uncomfortable cockpit seats in smaller planes. The interior was finished with a polished veneer, just like a fancy hotel.

“I’ve never flown in such a nice seat before,” Lillia mumbled.

“Same. I feel like I might fall asleep,” Treize agreed.

“This is so cool! It’s just like a luxury cruise ship or a luxury train! Not that I’ve been on them before,” Carlo cheered, having missed Lillia’s comment.

“Children, do not get out of your seats during the flight, and do not make a commotion. Sit quietly and look out the windows. Put on your seat belts tightly when we take off and land. The bathroom is in the back but try not to go unless you absolutely must.”

The man they met earlier was explaining all the safety guidelines from the aisle, but almost none of the children were paying attention.

“—That is all. Was anyone even listening?”

Soon, the man shut the door and left.

Lillia looked out the window. Through the glass, only a meter above the surface, she could see the bridge, the harbor, the village by the lake, and the people there.

“I wonder how long it’ll take?” she wondered.

“140 kilometers in a straight line. A seaplane like this could probably get 200 to 250 kilometers per hour if the weather’s good. Add in takeoff and landing, and it’ll probably take about an hour. Unless we stop by other places or something to sightsee.”

“I see. I should have asked. I might fall asleep, so wake me up when we get there.”

“Okay.”

The moment Treize replied, the engines began to rumble overhead and the noise filled the cabin.

“It’s the engines! We’re flying!”

“Wow! We’re flying!”

“Yay!”

Listening to the children cheer, Lillia leaned against the comfy seat and closed her eyes.

<What?>

<A boy and a girl have boarded the seaplane. I am reporting because their presence was not part of the original plan.>

<...>

<Sir, are you listening?>

<What of the seaplane?>

<The engines just started—ah, it’s taken off now. We can see from here through the binoculars. It’s just about on time.>

<...I see. Understood. Thank you for the notice.>

<Shall we proceed as planned?>

<Yes. You may.>

<Then if you’ll excuse me, Major.>

“What’s going on here?” said the suit-clad man, putting down the receiver. He was in a small hotel in the village. In the room was a single bed, a desk, and a haphazardly-arranged radio system.

The seaplane outside was circling the village as it gained altitude.

“What is going on here?” said another man, putting down the receiver.

He was in his mid-thirties, and had black hair and scholarly silver-rimmed glasses. He wore a green-and-brown checkered shirt and light pants, along with a vest with many pockets. He looked like he was ready to go fishing.

“Is there a problem, Major Travas?” asked the young woman next to him.

She was in her late twenties. Although she was not wearing a vest, she also wore a similar shirt and pants. She had short brown hair and sharp, stern eyes.

The man and the woman were in a bus. A perfectly common 20-seater bus with an aisle between the seats. The bus was stopped by the roadside, idling with the engine still on. Outside the bus was a forest and a field.

Other than the two, there was a man dressed like a driver in the driver’s seat, and five men in their twenties to their thirties near the back. They were all wearing vests like fishermen. Their belongings consisted of simple backpacks and bags, and long fishing pole holders. From the outside they merely looked like a group out on a fishing trip.

The woman and the men all looked at Major Travas. He did not look like a man on a fishing trip, his expression betraying incredible unease.

“Hm. We do have a problem, Axe,” he said to the woman.

Then,

“Attention, everyone,” he said loudly, so everyone on the bus could hear. “This is an emergency. My friend’s daughter and her companion, who went missing last night, have boarded the seaplane in question.”

The men grimaced in unison. The driver found himself turning, but caught himself and turned back.

The woman called Axe swallowed. “Major. It’s—”

“As such, there will be a change of plans. I will inform you of the changes in due time,” Major Travas said, picking up the receiver he had just put down. The phone had been hidden so it could only be seen when the seat was lifted.

“It’s too dangerous to change our plans now, Major. You’re the one who taught me to never wing things,” Axe cut in disapprovingly. Major Travas smiled.

“I’m not winging *everything*.”

“Sir?”

“I’ll tell you the details later,” Major Travas replied, and turned the dial. The thin cable stretching from the roof of the bus was connected to the phone line on the utility pole by the road.

Someone soon picked up. Major Travas spoke into the receiver.

“I know that the factory has ceased operations. I’m just calling to get the local weather forecast—”

<Yes, sir. As I informed you yesterday, I’m available to leave at any time.>

<Then I need you immediately. This is Code Rhubarb. I repeat, Code Rhubarb. Both are aboard.>

<...How’d that happen? Why?>

<I can’t say for sure yet, but maybe she’s just as fond of getting involved in things as a certain someone. I’ll ask about the details later.>

<All right. I'll be right there. But where could they be? That lake is huge.>

<We have no way of knowing from here. It's all on you.>

<You're giving me a pretty big job, you know.>

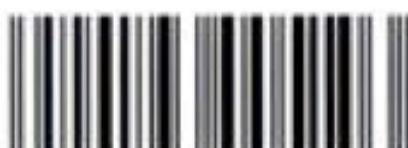
<Good luck.>

-To be continued in Volume II-





9784840229937



1920193005103

ISBN4-8402-2993-7

C0193 ¥510E

 MediaWorks

発行●メディアワークス

定価: **本体510円**

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